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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

November
1994

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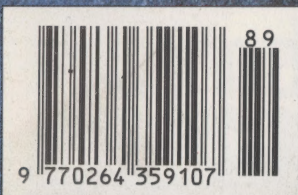
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interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 89

November 1994

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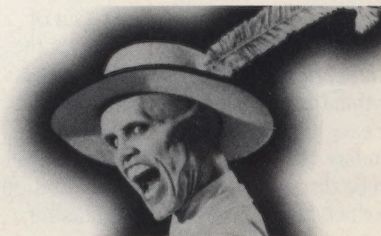
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Interface

As everyone will have observed, we're in the middle of a typesetting and design shake-up here at *Interzone*, thanks to our new production person, the energetic **Paul Brazier** (late of *SF Nexus*). There may be slight hiccups along the way, but we hope that the magazine will emerge looking better, livelier, clearer, more modern – and that it may attract new readers more readily as a result. However, we don't wish to sacrifice any of the past user-friendliness achieved by our previous typesetter, **Bryan Williamson** (many thanks, Bryan, for your 12 years of extremely reliable service); so please let us know what you think of the redesign, even if you should happen to fall into the category of what Paul Brazier (in last issue's guest editorial) calls the "moaning minnies." We'd be interested to hear a full range of views, from those who are gung-ho for a redesign (as some of you have been: see past letter columns) to those whose instincts in these matters are more cautious.

British Hugo Awards

As I write, the results of the annual Science Fiction Achievement Awards (the Hugos) have just been announced at the World SF Convention in Canada. The winners will be listed in a future "Ansible Link" column, but since it concerns us directly I bring you news here of what happened to the three British-based nominees. I'm delighted to report that two *Interzone* regulars succeeded in winning Hugo Awards – **John Clute** (with Peter Nicholls) for Best Non-Fiction (*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, second edition); and **David Langford** for Best Fan Writer (his news-sheet, *Ansible*, a shortened version of which we publish here every month). Very well done, both. Alas, the third UK nominee, *Interzone* itself, failed to win in the Best Semi-Professional Magazine category: that honour went to Andy Porter's news-magazine **SF Chronicle** for the second year running (Andy publishes from New York).

As I've remarked before, it's an odd category, this "Best Semi-Prozine." It's the category in which *Interzone* finds itself every year simply because our circulation is small by American standards – although we would contend that we are in every other sense a fully professional publication – and our competi-

tors, by the nature of things, are always the American news-magazines, *SF Chronicle* and *Locus*. (There is, in fact, no award given to best professional magazine; and if there were, of course, we'd find ourselves up against *Asimov's*, *F & SF*, *Analog* and the other larger-circulation US fiction periodicals.) Either way, the odds are (and would continue to be) stacked against *Interzone's* chances of ever winning a Hugo.

There is, however, a ray of hope. Next year's World SF Convention will be held in Britain for the first time since 1987 (Glasgow, 24th-28th August 1995). Because it's taking place on this side of the Atlantic, the proportion of UK and European members will be very much higher than is normally the case at a Worldcon – and everyone who is a registered member of the convention, whether or not they actually attend, will have a chance to vote for the Hugo Awards. If you're interested in joining **Intersection** (as the '95 Worldcon is called), either as an attending or as a "supporting" member, see the details in the advert on the inside front cover of this issue. You're best advised to hurry, though – rates are bound to rise again early in the New Year, and Hugo nomination forms will probably be sent out in the spring.

David Pringle

Interaction

Dear Editors

Christopher Priest's entertaining "Out of the Temple" (IZ 86), while maintaining the sf/fantasy divide, at the same time reveals how thin the line can be between the two, how easy it is to cross and re-cross the boundary. Such potential for crossover can even be discerned in his initial polarization of the two fields. The religious fantasizer, he says, irrationally proclaims the approaching end of the world and prescribes what to do about it (pray etc); the rational sf story writer foresees the end of the world and says what it will be like (tidal waves etc.). Fair enough; but only a flick is needed to reverse the roles. Thus, the religious visionary tells what the end of the world will be like ("And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away": Revelation XX.11); and the apocalyptic science-fiction writer may offer rationally conceived recipes for action (e.g. Wells's "Open Conspiracy," various post-holocaust reconstruction novels).

Something of the same ambivalence is surely present in his probings of ufology and cerealogy. The irony of his conclusion, "Clever people these hoaxers," switches him back from a carefully formulated, rational, but seemingly quite impossible explanation of an ultra-complicated crop circle

to a selection of understandably rejected, irrational interpretations – leaving him where? The answer seems to be philosophically / psychologically in a position analogous to that of a 'quantum observer', with himself integrally involved in process and paradoxical outcome. And aren't we all in the same boat – or flying saucer? Werner Heisenberg (in *Physics and Philosophy*), while refusing to limit the application of rational thinking, concluded that "existing scientific concepts cover only a limited part of reality, and the other part that has not yet been understood is infinite." As to what is "reality," that is the question that teasingly haunts Christopher Priest's witty and thought-provoking essay – as it does his novels and stories. Jung held that "what we call illusion is very real for the psyche," but added that psychic reality could not be taken as "commensurable with conscious reality": a partial answer, perhaps.

K.V. Bailey
Alderney, C.I.

Dear Editors:

The latest *Interzone* (number 87) tripled its readership in our house. Knowing that one of my daughters was going to a T*ke Th*t concert I suggested she read Stuart Palmer's "Get Hot and Dance!" first, and she thought it was wonderful. Not to mention

accurate. Now she's passing the story around her friends and we quote from the story while watching the Chart Show. Who said healthy cynicism was dead? Great stuff.

Andy Sawyer

Librarian/Administrator
SF Foundation Collection
Sydney Jones Library
University of Liverpool

Editor: Andy's letter came by e-mail. Yes, this magazine now has an e-mail address (interzone@cix.compulink.co.uk), but we're still in the early stages of learning how to use the facility. As yet, we do not wish to receive subscription queries or story-submission enquiries by e-mail (we're not sure we can cope), but those who want to send comments for the letter column, and who have access to the means, are welcome to send us their remarks electronically.

Dear Editors:

Congratulations! Another of life's great mysteries dealt with through the medium of fiction in your excellent publication. Stuart Palmer, in his story "Get Hot and Dance!" explains at last the Take That phenomenon.

As I have never read *SF Nexus*, I am awaiting your transmogrification with, well ... I dunno, really ... a measure of apprehension. Theoretically, a breath of fresh air is almost always good news for a well-estab-

lished magazine but there is this knackered old adage about babies and bathwater, isn't there? Please (*please!*) keep it uppermost in your minds while madly revitalizing and reorganizing.

Anne Acaster
Maidstone, Kent

Dear Editors:

Dr J. D. Stephen/Jack Deighton (letters, *IZ* 87) agrees with you that there doesn't seem to be any Scottish sf. In the same way as the Canadian writer Geoff Ryman has become an English writer, might I suggest that Yorkshireman Graham Dunstan Martin has become a Scottish writer? He has taught at Edinburgh University since 1965, and his novels, particularly *Time-Slip*, *The Dream Wall* and *Half a Glass of Moonshine*, have a distinctively Scottish voice, not just in his use of Scottish words and settings but in the very speech patterns and personalities of many of his characters.

David V. Barrett
Croydon, Surrey

Editor: *There have been many more Scottish sf/fantasy writers than were mentioned in Jack Stephen's letter (or in my book review which provoked his letter). For instance, one important name of the past we both overlooked is J. Leslie Mitchell, author of the sf novels Three Go Back (1932) and Gay Hunter (1934). Mitchell is of importance not so much for these books but because he became one of the great names of Scottish realist literature, writing as "Lewis Grassie Gibbon."*

Dear Editors:

Jack Deighton's search in *IZ* 87 for an identifiable "Scottish science fiction" set me thinking about the odds against such a beast ever existing.

Most older British sf writers worked within the Gernsback/ASF American tradition: Arthur C Clarke, J.T. McIntosh, Bob Shaw and James White (to use Deighton's examples). Their voices may have been individual, but their subject-matter and modes of thought were obviously American. Until that consensus American-style future disintegrated, only a few sf writers worked outside it.

Visiting Britain 40 years ago, Alfred Bester did find one distinctively British pattern of sf story: set up a situation with one obvious conclusion, work steadily towards that conclusion, *The End*. This was certainly different to sf as Bester knew it. He was too charitable to point out that this was the simplistic technique of non-professionals. However, even then better and more honourably non-American writers were appearing, and more continued to appear, the heirs of Wells and Dickens and Hardy. But not, it seems, the heirs of Stevenson.

England has many writers whose sf is purely English: Wyndham, Aldiss, Priest, Roberts. The remaining countries within the U.K. are much smaller, so have propor-

tionately less chance of any separate sf identities. (Imagine the surprise and delight of a Welsh researcher – me – discovering that Wales' best-known sf author was Cardiff's own Lionel Fanthorpe, the mainstay of Badger Books.) Furthermore, all British countries other than England are still mainly Celtic, and hence are happier with myth and fantasy rather than anything futuristic.

As regards Scottish sf, Deighton correctly pin-points Angus MacVicar, who wrote some very successful juvenile sf built solidly around Scottish personalities and Scottish attitudes. However, even MacVicar is better known for his excellent non-sf books (thrillers and more recently memoirs). The only modern sf equivalent is Iain M. Banks, whose work seems more individual or melting-pot British than Scottish.

Similarly in Ireland Ian Macdonald is about as Irish as Ballard is English, i.e. rather more cosmopolitan than might be wished by a purist about national literatures.

Wales, Cornwall and the Isle of Man are all too small to support many sf writers; any talent which does emerge is promptly sucked outward into the general British scene – as happened with the Manx writer Nigel Kneale, who spellbound the entire U.K. in the 50s with his *Quatermass* tv trilogy. (It's ironic that the finest fusion of hard sf with Celtic fantasy-horror should have come from such a tiny country otherwise unknown in sf.)

I've kept this survey brief in an attempt at clarity. The facts show that no distinctively Scottish major sf writer has emerged, and is unlikely to, given the nature of the Celtic countries and their relationship to the wider sf markets of England and America. However, unlikely doesn't mean impossible.

John W. Campbell probably did great harm to Duncan Lunan's career, trying to mould him into the Great Scottish Analog Author, and yet Campbell was nearly right. A short story such as Lunan's "In The Arctic" shows that sf in a Scottish accent is quite feasible, and Lunan is capable of writing it. There must be other such writers around if, as Deighton says, we know where to look.

Note that a Scottish market-place might not necessarily benefit the native sf. The Scottish-published magazine *Nebula* flourished at the same time as MacVicar's sf, but it printed purely American-style sf from the likes of Tubb, Russell, and Silverberg. (Which were good, but not Scottish.) So be warned. If an identifiable Scottish or Irish or Welsh sf is to emerge, it must fight for publication against the best submissions from England and America; it must be both different and better. Yet somewhere in Glasgow, the William MacIvanney or Neil Munro of sf could be word-processing even now, defying all these adverse historical precedents. I hope so.

David Redd
Haverfordwest, Wales

Dear Editors:

Charles Platt's lively account of *New Worlds* in the 1960s ("The Carnival of Angst," *IZ* 87) contained significant omissions. For example, you would never know from his piece that it wasn't an all-male affair, apart from the mention of his anonymous ex-girlfriend. There was no mention of Hilary Bailey, Daphne Castell, Josephine Saxton or Pamela Zoline, to name but four. The last-named's "Heat Death of the Universe" is only one of their stories that sticks in the memory. In many ways, they inspired the next generation to produce a more self-conscious, feminist sf.

Also, the American response was not quite as negative as Platt makes out. In particular, that staunch supporter Judith Merrill published her *England Swings SF* as early as 1968 and she was enthusing about the "prospects and images of Ballard's unique and persuasive inner landscape" in the pages of *Fantasy & Science Fiction* back in August 1966.

John Brady
London

Dear Editors:

As a person who has recently (the last six months) started reading *Interzone* avidly, I have been very interested in the stories, interviews and readers' letters in each month's magazine.

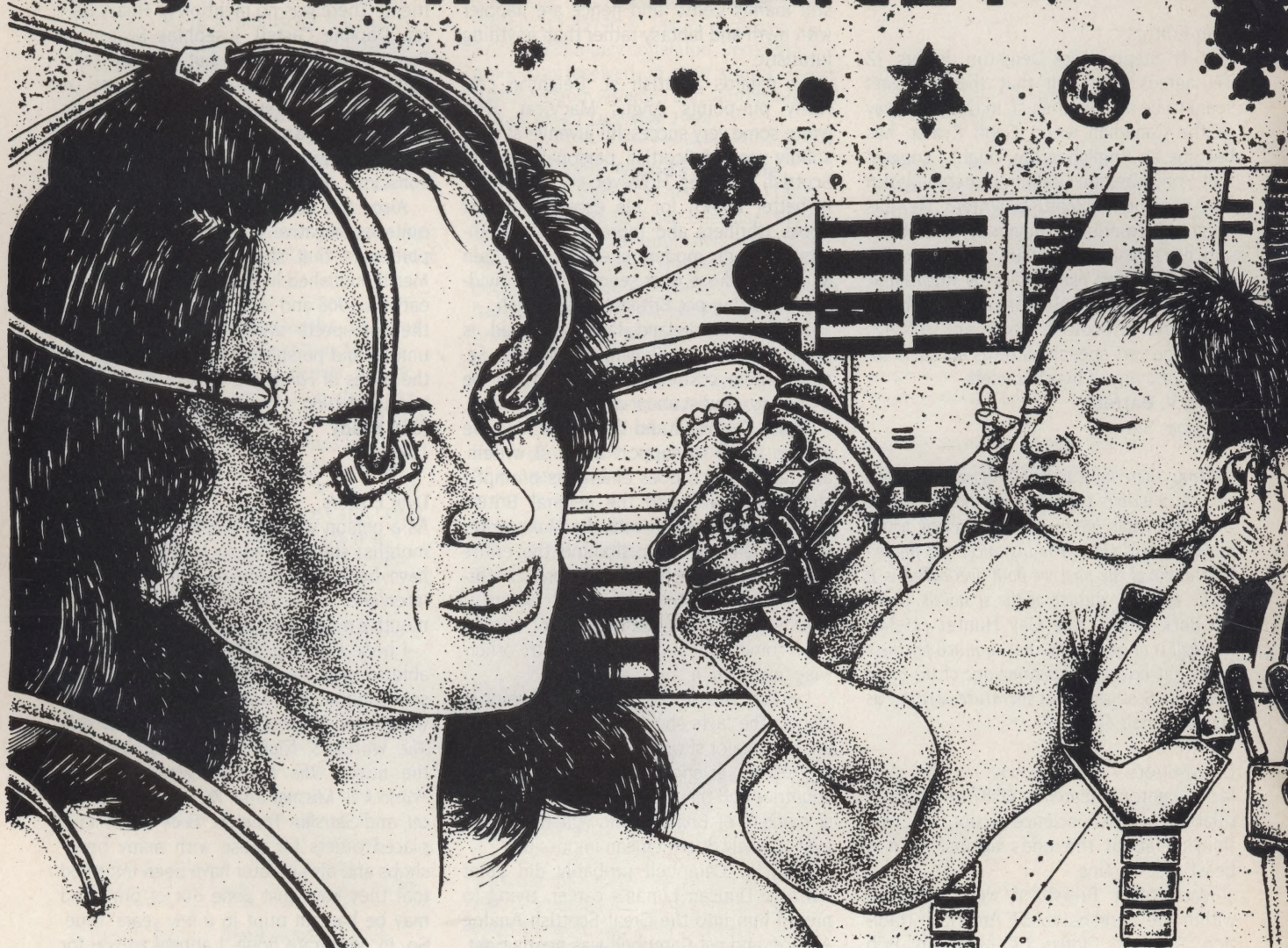
I hope that you or your readers may be able to help me in my quest. I have been searching for over a year now for two books written by Christopher Stasheff. They are: *The Warlock's Night Out*, which includes the novels *The Warlock Wandering*, *The Warlock is Missing* and *The Warlock Heretical*; and *Starship Troupers, Book Two*. I have placed orders for these with many bookshops and always later have been informed that they have just gone out of print and may be back in print in a few years' time. So, in desperate hope, I appeal to you for your assistance in finding these two elusive books.

Julian Rolfe
Telford, Shropshire

Editor: *We receive a number of letters of this kind, but unfortunately are unable to give direct help – we're too busy producing a monthly magazine to be able to enter the book-dealing business or to provide detailed bibliographical information. That said, Interzone offers many leads each month to those who want to purchase out-of-the-way items. Our "Books Received" column lists all those sf/fantasy books recently published and sent to us, with ISBNs and other information; and our "Small Ads" regularly include adverts from second-hand booksellers. Two sf mail-order bookdealers of good repute are Andy Richards, 22 Kings Lane, Windlesham, Surrey GU20 6JQ (tel. 0276-475388); and Simon Gosden, 25 Avondale Rd., Rayleigh, Essex SS6 8NJ (tel. 0268-747564). There are many others, both here and in the USA: watch our Small Ads!*

PARALLAX TRANSFORM

By JOHN MEANEY ★



Karyn moved through utter darkness, hating it, bare feet slippery on smooth plastic. Sweat gathered under the pendant round her neck and trickled between her breasts. Suddenly her pendant emitted a low beeping noise, giving away her location. Why hadn't she left the damned thing behind?

Something massive slammed into her, pinioned her arm and bowled her over. She tried to twist out but it was too late and she smashed into the ground and lay there, foetus-like, hurting like hell.

"Don't say it," she muttered. "Centre. Balance."

"Lights," said a deep voice.

Harsh light flooded the sparse gymnasium. Bare white walls, blue padded floor. A large bearish man, wearing white aikido jacket and black skirt-like hakama, was kneeling beside Karyn. A holo logo of UNSA, a golden latticed sphere, revolved slowly near the ceiling.

"News item." The voice came from Karyn's pendant.

"A third *mu*-space ship has been found floating empty in

real-space near its—"

"Shut up, Sal."

The voice fell silent. Another pilot lost. No time to think about that now. Ignoring the pain, she struggled up to a kneeling position.

"You were a little tense," said the bearish man.

"Yes, Sensei."

"Your pendant's beeping was a bit of a giveaway, too," he said lightly. He wasn't smiling, though, Karyn realised. She hadn't failed a test, had she?

She and Sensei — actually Father Mulligan SJ, PhD — had some common background: he raised by monks, she raised by nuns in a UN-funded orphanage. Surrounded by 300 children, yet always utterly alone.

At first she had feared Sensei might drop her from the programme because she was a godless heathen. Now she feared he loved her too much to let her become a pilot.

"If you go on — is it worth the price of darkness?" he asked. Were those tears glistening in his eyes? Karyn felt cold.



Illustrations by Russell Morgan

Her fear could disqualify her from the programme. For once, Sensei's sympathy and insight were obstacles to her ambition.

"I'm not scared of the dark," she lied.

"Your physicist's intuition is remarkable," Sensei said obliquely. He meant, she would need more than physics, more than aikido-trained spatial awareness – PhD and san-dan notwithstanding – where she was going. Hoped she was going.

"You know," he continued, "that I joined the Jesuits relatively late in life?"

"Yeah. I knew that."

"When you get to Wyoming – look up my son."

She had passed! But – his son? He had never mentioned a son before, though she knew he had joined the priesthood as a widower.

Sensei's eyes were shut. Praying for the lost pilot, Karyn guessed. He knew better than to ask her to pray with him. She closed her eyes. Relax, she told herself. Impossible. Her

skin was tingling. I'm going to be a pilot, she thought. At last.

"Training with the lights off is one thing," said Sensei suddenly. "Being blind for the rest of your life is another matter entirely."

Karyn's eyes snapped open. "I know," she said.

"I hope you do," said Sensei. "I'll pray for you. Even though you don't want me to."

In the place beside space...

The event-pattern, complex rivulets of energy, spilled out rapidly from the pinpoint of its birth. The intrusion had sparked the pattern's genesis, in the moment of the intruder's own destruction. Its structure had dissipated almost instantly, caught up in the wave of expanding pattern-growth.

It spread out rapidly in all directions, becoming a detectable phenomenon at higher and higher levels of magnitude, feeding on its own success, accelerating its growth. Concurrently, it grew inwards, smaller and smaller fibres of energy, loops and whorls

and tangles of energy flows growing ever finer, ever more complex, reaching into ever deeper levels of existence.

Flows and transformations. The greater probability was that they would attenuate, that the pattern would exhaust itself and fade from existence. But some processes, by chance, helped or hindered other transactions to complete, speeding or slowing other processes. Cooperation and strife grew within the pattern, and that was the key. Auto-catalytic feedback loops were forming, starting to lock into place. Feedback. The potential for complexity.

The event-pattern might yet survive.

UTech from the air: verdant Wyoming parkland, with a central piazza – concentric octagons of orange and green brick – linked by glinting golden walkbelts to widely spaced silver-ribbed domes.

Karyn pressed her face against the plexiglass as the taxi dropped lower. Tiny figures, purple-caped students, dotted the piazza and the walkbelts. The taxi touched down. She pressed her credit ring against the socket, grabbed her holdall, and slid out as the gull door lifted.

She stepped clear and shaded her eyes to watch the taxi's ascent, taking a pace back to follow its trajectory. Suddenly there was a flurry of movement around her feet, a dog barking madly and a man's voice shouting "Watch out!"

Karyn jumped away and spun round, hands on guard, heart thumping. The German Shepherd dog she had nearly stepped on was still barking, the whites of its eyes showing. A small man crouched beside the dog, patting it and trying to calm it down.

"It's okay, boy," he said. Slowly the dog grew less agitated.

"Oh God," Karyn said, shaking. "I'm sorry."

The dog, which was crowned with a small silver cowl and visor, looked at Karyn. The man, insectile ceramic lobes protruding from his temples, angled his head up also. His eye sockets held only scar tissue.

"You should watch where you're going," he said.

He was so obviously blind, his words so incongruous, that it took Karyn a moment to regain her focus. "Look, I'm really sorry. I didn't realise there was anybody behind me."

"Okay," said the man, rising slowly. "He's not hurt, though it's no thanks to you."

He had been worried about the dog, thought Karyn. And the dog had reacted so strongly because he was protective of his handler. Her fault.

"I – I'm visiting the VL Institute," Karyn said. "I don't know my way around yet."

Dog and man turned their heads simultaneously. The man pointed. "That dome." His voice was calmer now.

"Thanks. Uh, sorry again."

"Okay." The man stood still, forehead furrowed, as the dog looked at Karyn closely. Karyn could almost feel the effort of concentration as the man tuned in to his dog's perceptions.

"You're wearing a spacer's jumpsuit," he said. "Pilot Candidate?"

Karyn grinned. "Yeah."

The man's face twisted. "Damn you, bitch! Why don't you get the hell back to where you came from?" He turned and stalked angrily away across the piazza, with the dog trotting to keep up with him.

Karyn could only stand and watch them go.

In a moment alongside time...

The event-pattern was finding energy sources to sustain its growth. At first this was a random thing, but there were correlations between the energy state of some of its structures and the subsequent finding of growth energy nearby, and these structures flourished. Perception and tropism. The acquisition of senses and search strategies proceeded in parallel.

Likewise, it learned to avoid those sources which were unsuitable, or strange. At first, it had faltered on encountering these. Now it began to develop ways of growing around or encapsulating these sources. The sub-patterns which accomplished these strategies also flourished.

The event-pattern was learning, and growing stronger. With each new energy source entwined within its structure, the chances of imminent dissolution were diminished.

In the Assistant Registrar's office, Karyn sat with a fine china cup and saucer balanced on her lap. The Assistant Registrar – call me Maggie, she had said – sat behind a glass desk.

"You sounded a little tense when you arrived," she was saying. "Did someone give you a hard time on the way in?"

Karyn let out a breath. "You guessed," she said.

"It's happened before, I'm afraid." Maggie's sightless eyes shifted from side to side. "You won't encounter much hostility, though. Most people admire you."

"Oh. Right."

"You're okay now, though?"

"Sure," Karyn said. "Uh, how many Pilot Candidates are here right now?"

"Just you, this intake. And one from the previous batch, who'll be leaving soon."

"No more?" Karyn realized she sounded wistful. Embarrassing.

"The one who's here, the handsome Dart, will be quite sufficient, from what I hear."

"Sounds interesting."

Maggie, smiling, handed over a small data crystal. "That's your suggested schedule. Talk it over with the department."

She had choices? Karyn wondered how she was going to survive two months without constant driving pressure. Just daily confrontations with the reality of blindness. The final stage of training.

Karyn stood up, still holding her cup and saucer.

"Maggie?" she asked. "What do you think of us?"

Maggie's clouded eyes wandered. "Most of the time," she said, "I think you're as brave as hell."

And the other times? Karyn was afraid to ask.

Loud music – insistent drill/baroque – pulsated through the dimly lit bar. Its name hung in the air, a smaller version of the pus-yellow holo in the corridor outside: the FIZZY CYST. Medical Physics was just down the corridor.

Karyn, sipping fruit juice, walked past booths of games tables. Solid pool was popular, intent students struggling with the strange attractors of perfect collisions in virtual parallelpipeds. They looked so young. Despite Karyn's new sweatshirt with its holo FourSpeak logo – Buddhist principles segueing into symmetry equations, two Eightfold Ways arranged in a cube – she felt old, out of place. Why was she here?

"Genki, pretty lady." A dark-skinned youth with long black

hair falling over his eyes. "I'm Jakar. You FourSpeak?"

"Genki yo," Karyn replied automatically. "Karyn. Uh, I guess so."

"Tessaractions?"

Karyn felt the conversation slipping away from her. "I beg your pardon?"

"We're halfway through a game," he said, slipping into standard Anglic. "I don't suppose you'd like to join us?"

"Why not?"

Karyn followed him to a darkened booth at the rear. A dozen of Jakar's friends were clustered around a network of golden words suspended above the games table. They shifted up to make room for Karyn and Jakar.

Each sentence ran in one of four directions, Karyn noted, golden words running horizontally either north/south or east/west, or vertically up/down, or along a diagonal dimension. FourSpeak.

Jakar held a finger to his lips, then leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Do you want to have a go? Just nod or shake your head."

Karyn, bemused, nodded yes.

"Just say 'Dictate mode' to start," Jakar whispered. He said it too loudly, though, and a small red dot appeared in the air in front of him. The words "To start," in white, hung at the periphery of the network of words.

There were boos and laughter and sarcastic clapping from his friends. Jakar flushed.

The image, Karyn realised as she began to read, was a kind of epic poem in true FourSpeak where each node – the first or last word of each sentence – hung at the confluence of four arcs of words, four sentences. A four-dimensional golden web. Its content seemed to be a bawdy recasting of Norse mythology, complete with invented runic physics and Thor's sexual hang-ups. Clever, clever stuff.

Jakar deleted his spurious entry, exited voice mode, and slipped a cursor-thimble onto each forefinger. Then he reached into the network of words and began fingerwriting with both hands simultaneously. Sweat sprang out on his forehead as his friends began to urge him on.

Karyn guessed she was watching a virtuoso performance, a performance she lacked the understanding to appreciate. Suddenly depressed, she slipped out of the booth and walked over to the bar counter. She sat down heavily on a vacant stool, next to a big man in a black jumpsuit, and leaned her elbows on the polished steel surface. The barkeep scuttled along the countertop towards her.

"Don't give me a menu of psychoactive agents," she said, tapping the barkeep's casing with a fingernail. The thing looked home-made, somebody's research project. "Get me something for a fruit-juice drinker who's having a hard time."

It scuttled back to its socket, and returned with a glass of pink liquid which tasted like strawberries and made the world feel warm and cozy.

"Wonderful," she said, draining it quickly and gesturing for a refill. The sudden warm feeling was very relaxing.

"You know, that's powerful stuff." It was the big man on the next stool. His face was long and twisted – ugly but sexy, she thought – and his hair was pulled back into a long braid. There was a black lightning flash decal on his left cheekbone.

"Don't understand," Karyn said, taking her refilled glass from the barkeep and swallowing a large gulp. "Tess'ractions.

Won'erful game. If only I could follow it."

"It's for kids." The big man's sleeves were rolled up to reveal heavy forearms, thick wrists.

"Don't understand," Karyn repeated. She gestured for a third glass. "Even Sal – Sal's my only friend, and even he wouldn't understand."

"You're thinking," said the big man, "How can I navigate the fractal dimensions of *mu*-space, when I can't even handle a kids' 4-D game? Am I right?"

Karyn looked at him very carefully. "You'd be Dart then, would you? The other pilot?"

He answered with that very sexy grin.

Her third drink had arrived, and she resolved to take this one slowly, a sip at a time. Possibly that was a mistake. By the time she had drained the glass, she had just about reached the stage where the solution to the human condition was within her grasp. She was telling Dart earnestly that if it weren't for Irish and Japanese Jesuits, and Christianity and Islam in general after the Baghdad Accords, then the world would still be in the Milling, the third millennium breakdown, and it was almost a shame their influence was fading because even if it was all superstitious nonsense what would it be replaced with?

At some point Dart proposed a toast, raised his glass and said "Thank God for atheism."

Karyn giggled. That was good. She felt herself slowly tipping sideways off her stool, and that was even funnier. It felt so relaxing, she closed her eyes and went to sleep, somewhere in mid-air.

Her dreams were deep wells of darkness. Two of the other girls – deliberately, she later realized – had made her laugh in class, just as Sister Mary Joseph turned and spotted Karyn. Karyn braced herself for a slap on the leg, but it never came. Instead, the darkness.

The chapel, overnight. No candles, no lights. Kneel and pray, my girl. Pray for forgiveness. Pray in case the Good Lord sends an angel to fetch you to Him tonight. Pray. Pray.

Dark. Cold, though her knees were two spots of burning pain. She dared not fall asleep, in case she died. How can you die? How can you suddenly not be? Tears trickled silently, coldly, down her cheeks.

Creaks and whispering. Just wooden benches and draughty stonework? If only that were true. If only she could close her eyes and rest.

All around, unseen angels and demons crouched in the darkness, waiting for her to sleep.

Karyn woke cold and stiff, squinting against the pale grey dawn. Alone. Her room. On top of the bed, still in her jumpsuit. Her bare feet were freezing.

"Logon," she croaked, sitting up and searching in vain for her shoes. A logon display, the intersecting one, zero and mu – the ideogram for nothingness, for neither/nor – hung over her desktop. She looked at it, letting the terminal scan her retina. "Get me Sal."

She staggered to the bathroom. After a few minutes she came out, applying a detox patch to her neck.

The disembodied head of an elegant man, mustachioed and top-hatted, was floating above the terminal pad. As Karyn sat down on the bed, a gloved hand appeared and

doffed the apparition's hat.

"Greetings, dear lady. May I be of service?" Sal O'Mander was her personal agent, a never-ending job on the InfoNet, with some powerful non-standard code extensions. Sal had been her graduation present to herself, six years ago, bought with the remainder of her frugally-managed UNSA scholarship money. The extensions had been a vacation bargain from the Seoul black market, nearly three years later.

"Find me Dart. Here on campus."

Dart's picture appeared.

"Pilot Candidate David Mulligan. Room seven epsilon, this dome."

Sensei's son. Sensei had told her to look up his son when she got to Wyoming. Who else would he turn out to be but the only other Pilot Candidate on site?

"Put me through to him."

"I'd be delighted. It is, however, rather early in the morning. Perhaps I should leave a message on his mail queue?"

"Thanks, Sal." Thank God for software which didn't do just as it was told. "Leave him this message – can we have lunch? His choice of location."

"Done."

"I'm going back to bed," she said, sliding in beneath the covers. She lay back and looked at the ceiling. She could remember the tail-end of her dream, but something more than that was bothering her.

The news item. When Sal had beeped her pendant, back in the dojo just before Sensei came out of the darkness and crunched her into the floor. The news item about the missing pilot, that's what was wrong.

For ships to transit into *mu*-space and never return... that was not unknown, and for maiden voyages it was depressingly common. The pilot's control of her ship had to be absolutely perfect. But this case was different.

The ship had not disappeared into *mu*-space forever, but had been found drifting in real-space, relatively close to its destination. There had been three such cases in the last two months, and never anything like them before that time. Space-faring aliens? Of the 18 inhabited worlds, only two held recognizably sentient life-forms, neither with more than medieval technology. An unknown space-faring race?

"Background search, Sal," Karyn said, looking at the ceiling and thinking hard. "UTech and VL Institute, all research papers. Topic: *mu*-space and intelligent life. Get me all you can. Logoff."

The room was much darker after Sal had disappeared. Karyn closed her eyes and slept.

In an existence parallel to life...

The event-pattern reached a critical level of complexity. A small sub-pattern, as it was washed through with energy flows, caused those flows to spread out into a new event-pattern.

The second pattern was very like the first, almost a duplicate, but it lacked the sub-pattern which had acted as a blueprint. The duplicate could not replicate itself.

The event-pattern created several more sterile duplicates before expansion caused it to reach out and incorporate their energies back into itself.

Karyn and Dart had lunch in a large noisy refectory. It was in

the VL Institute dome – the Via Lucis Institute for the Visually Impaired, part of UTech – and most of the diners were blind. Some had camera implants or links to seeing-eye animals, including a cute capuchin monkey and a raucous parrot. The diners without technological enhancement were the ones running their fingers lightly over their food as they ate, unable to see their plates. Karyn felt chilled.

Her pendant beeped once during the meal, but she thumbed the off-button before Sal could speak. She found herself telling Dart about darkness training against his father, and how scared she had been, though she had tried to hide it.

Afterwards, Dart took her down to the sports level. From the dojo's spectator gallery they watched a blind judo player whip his sighted opponents into the mat time and again.

"My God," Karyn said softly.

Dart, looking subdued, said nothing.

"Oh no," Karyn said. She realized why he had brought her here, lacking the words to tell her any other way. "The conversion. You've undergone Phase Two."

Dart took a deep breath. "Everything looks – sharp-edged, but kind of flat. It's hard to explain."

"Soon enough," Karyn said, looking at him steadily, "I'll be finding out for myself."

Karyn taught a seminar on quantum chaos, her mind in turmoil. Back in her room, she logged on and asked for Sal. The familiar sardonic smile, the doffing of the hat.

"Good day, my dear."

"Hi, Sal. Give me today's –" Karyn stopped. The image continued to speak.

"– I regret to say," said Sal, "that this is a non-interactive recording."

What the hell was going on?

"A security phage tried to lock on when I accessed *mu*-Space and Differentiation; your Miscellaneous Topics folder contains a copy. To prevent tracing back to you, I have deleted all my on-line code."

"What?"

"As you will see," Sal continued, "The document is a mostly complete log of a bioresearch project. It has some personal notes on the nature of life, inserted by one of the team members, which I was also able to retrieve. I hope they are of interest."

Sal doffed his hat for the last time. "Your humble servant." Sal vanished.

"No, Sal. No."

She stared at the wall for an age, seeing nothing. Why had he done it? Her fault. Get me all you can, she had said, so he had used his illegal code. Her stupid fault.

The terminal was dead, save for a small InfoNet logo – the one/zero/*mu* emblem – hanging over it. She was still logged on to the public InfoNet environment, though her personal agent had been deleted. Had deleted itself.

Trembling, she opened a desk drawer and pulled out a small wallet, from which she extracted two crystals. One was the original copy of Sal's template, the other was the original of the illegal code extensions from Korea. She inserted them both into slots on the terminal pad, and told it to invoke the Sal template.

A pale head appeared above the terminal. "Instructions?"

it asked tonelessly.

"Oh," Karyn said. What had she done first with Sal? "Daily schedule. First daily item: check news boards..." Her voice trailed off.

"Please pick an option from this menu." A range of icons appeared, each a small moving video image with the flashy insignia of public news services.

Karyn stared at the list blankly.

"Please pick an option from this menu," the Sal template repeated.

Karyn breathed out slowly, the breath hissing between her teeth. This software wasn't Sal. It had the potential to grow into something as complex as Sal, as it modified its own code over the years. But it would never be Sal.

At what point had Sal's particular qualities emerged, his politeness with a hint of rakishness, his anticipation of her needs? Hard to imagine him any other way.

"End agent program," she said. When the InfoNet environment prompt reappeared she added, "zap agent program. Zap crystals in drives one and two."

"Are you sure?" asked the feminine voice of the public network.

"Just do it," said Karyn.

It didn't hold any clues. The stolen document related both to *mu*-space and intelligent life, but it wasn't about other life-forms able to penetrate the *mu*-space continuum.

The key image was a featureless black sphere two metres in diameter, floating in the centre of a lab. A hundred metal probes sprouted from its surface, like spikes on an ancient sea-mine.

Karyn grew cold as she scrolled through the text. The black sphere was an horizon-membrane, surrounding an extrusion of *mu*-space into the real continuum, the reverse of the coherent tunnelling effect used by *mu*-space ships.

The spike-like metal probes, held in place by magnetic fields, were phials bearing human embryos. Quantum tunnelling at the interface caused a gradient of *mu*-space radiation in the artificial wombs. The experimenters were manipulating energy gradients and biochemical environments, artificially selecting for embryos sensitive to *mu*-space energies. None was viable yet, but gradual progress was being achieved – if "progress" could describe the short-lived grotesqueries floating in the phials.

Pilots of the future.

It was a UN lab, but Karyn could find no approval seal from any ethics committee. Sal, with his less-than-legal search techniques, had stumbled upon this unpublished document and fallen prey to its less-than-legal protective measures.

In a sense, the embryos were part of a new life-form, one which included the lab machinery and software. This was pointed out in the personal notes of one of the project members. A poor justification, Karyn thought.

Cellular replication, both terrestrial and non-terrestrial, was described in ways new to her. On Earth, cells replicate because DNA is a cellular blueprint: like robot factories, ribosomes-plus-RNA read DNA and build the protein structures which form the new cell. But if there were only blueprints and robots, then each blueprint would be the design for a robot including its own blueprint, and that

blueprint would be for a robot containing its own blueprint...

All natural life had formed solutions for copying the blueprint as a separate process – DNA polymerases on Earth – but there must be other ways of avoiding infinite recursion. In the project, the software directed the extra duplication required.

Karyn's vision began to blur. New life-forms. That's what Sal had been, and now he was gone.

She downloaded the document into the crystal which had held Sal's template, and killed the on-line copy. If only she had backed-up Sal the same way – but there was so much redundancy on the InfoNet, who would have bothered?

Dart was fast, faster than his father. An overhand strike arced towards Karyn's forehead. She stepped forward, blended with the flow of his energy and threw him. It would have looked good to an observer, but they both felt how off-centre she was.

"I've an idea," Dart said. He reached forward and kissed her, very deeply, very slowly.

Karyn drew back, and smiled. With her fingertip, she traced the lightning flash on his cheekbone.

"Again," she said, centring herself.

Dart lunged forwards. Karyn stepped into the eye of the storm and Dart somersaulted and smashed into the mat.

"Perfect," said Karyn.

On the news bulletin board, Karyn watched UN medics implanting permanent contraceptives into Third World Mediterranean men and women, prior to providing basic supplies. Karyn's own implant could be deactivated chemically or by ultrasound, whenever she wished. Was this sensible world management, or the UN taking too much moral power upon itself?

Remember the alternative.

She ached with the need to discuss this with Dart, but he was committed and needed absolute concentration for his first flight, not doubts about what he was doing. Unsure whether she was doing the right thing, Karyn erased the crystal copy of the stolen lab report.

In a continuum beyond the universe...

The sub-pattern, undergoing incremental changes as the event-pattern grew, was swept by another tide of energy. This time it had the effect of complete replication, duplicating everything, including the sub-pattern which specified itself. The whole event-pattern locked in and stabilised as it replicated itself at ever smaller and ever greater scales, bootstrapping itself endlessly through all the dimensions of its existence.

Life.

Karyn was reviewing projections: FourSpeak to flat text, solid images to Flatland, real ships to *mu*-space. There were tactile displays for the blind students.

"If you change the angle of projection, you get nearly any shape or size you want," Jakar said, brushing back the long hair from his eyes.

"Yeah. The pilot's usually happier if their ship seems the same shape it was in real-space," Karyn said. "Otherwise it's a bit of a strain."

Some of the students laughed.

"How do... pilots see?" asked another student. The guide dog at his feet pricked up his ears.

"Direct interface to sensors at the horizon-membrane, which respond to quantum tunnelling events." Karyn tried to keep her voice level. "The visual cortex works directly with *mu*-space geometric constructs—"

There was a squeak as a blind girl pushed back her chair and left.

Karyn carried on talking for a few minutes, saving face, then cut the seminar short for an early break. Maybe she should have picked a different topic to talk about.

A coastline is a fractal image. Measure a coastline on a large scale map, divide by the scale to get the real length. On a smaller-scale map, it's equally crinkly: the more detailed view gives a greater length. What's the real length?

Being with Dart was a lot like coastlines. The closer you looked, the more there was to explore, the longer everything took.

Fractal sex.

Three weeks later, Karyn was sitting in her room, looking at the lifeless desktop terminal without really seeing it. She wanted to be with Dart, to share all his remaining hours on the planet, but he was at one of his numerous last-minute check-ups.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Karyn said, and the door slid open. "Hello, uh — Maggie. How're you doing?"

The Assistant Registrar, accompanied by a placid black retriever, smiled as Karyn led her to the room's only chair. The dog, unenhanced, wore harness and handle.

"This is Barney. Can I unharness him?"

"Sure."

Freed of the harness, Barney suddenly leaped around the room, barking loudly, wagging his tail madly, then flopped down at Karyn's feet with a big sigh. He looked at her with brown trusting eyes as she rubbed his belly.

"What a nutcase," said Karyn. "What brings you here, Maggie?"

"I know Dart flies to Zürich Flight Centre tomorrow—"

"Yeah." Karyn felt despair pressing down upon her.

"I came to suggest— you could have your Phase One injections done there. It's a little early, but that's all right. I checked."

Karyn just looked at her.

"I can cancel your classes for you," Maggie continued.

"And — Phase One is still reversible. What do you think?"

Karyn reached over and squeezed Maggie's hand. "Thanks, friend," she said.

The dog, still on his back, gave a small bark.

"And you, Barney," said Karyn.

It hunched in the pre-dawn like a dark brooding bird on the runway. Bulbous body and stubby curved wings. All around, bare and level concrete stretched for miles. Zürich Flight Centre was a low distant shadow.

Dart's ship.

Karyn stood on the runway looking up at its shadowed mass, picturing the pilot's cocoon deep inside, the bays for cargo and sleeping passengers, anaesthetized against the

mind-bending effects of *mu*-space. The passenger bays would be empty for its maiden flight.

Then the sun, pale yellow, peered over the horizon and washed the sky green and turquoise, dripped molten fire along the vessel's curves. Now, as though awakened, the glistening ship was bronze and huge, engorged with strength. Poised to fly.

Karyn turned and began to jog slowly down the massive runway, heading back to the Medical Complex six kilometres away, feeling very small and very frail.

Karyn, washed through with Phase One viral agents, walked unsteadily along the bleak white corridor. Passing a waste slot, she dug a crystal out of her pocket and trashed it. She had not got past the first paragraph of its instructions to Phase One Pilot Candidates: remain in bed for 18 hours. Screw that.

Using her pendant, she logged on verbally to the InfoNet and obtained audio directions to Dart's room. Three floors up.

"Thought so," she muttered, retching drily as the lift tube whisked her upwards.

Out onto another white corridor. A couple of staff members paying her no attention. She found Dart's door and palmed the door-plate.

His hospital bed took up most of the room. He turned his long face towards her, light glinting from the metal sockets where his eyes had been.

"Hiya, sweet thing," he said. "I suppose you've come for a ride on my rocket ship?"

"You bet," she said, just as her body was racked by a fit of coughing. "If I can stay alive that long."

She was too sick from the treatment to watch the launch. Mind spinning, she kept to her bed in the Medical Complex and mostly slept, dreaming of bronze spaceships and the feel of Dart's smooth skin. Finally she awoke feeling warm and relaxed, and her head was clear.

"You're awake." Maggie's voice.

Karyn looked down at the foot of the bed. Behind Maggie stood Sensei — Father Mulligan — with his face looking lined and grey, suddenly old.

"What are you two—?" Karyn stopped. "Oh, no. Not Dart. Not on his first flight. No. No, I don't believe it."

In the heart of mu-space...

Another intrusion. The event-pattern sensed the short-lived proto-pattern generated by the intruder, a proto-pattern which rapidly attenuated and died.

The event-pattern probed the intruder, laced its odd surface with tendrils of energy which slowly, slowly leaked through into the intruder's alien core.

The intruder tried to break away, to somehow suck itself out of existence, but the event-pattern's tendrils held the thing fast.

On occasion, novice pilots had miscalculated only slightly, and emerged unharmed from *mu*-space just a few days late. Karyn held this fantasy about Dart, but it grew remote with the passing weeks. A month after the launch, Sensei conducted a memorial service. Karyn did not attend.

A team of technicians helped her strip and lie on an autodoc couch. She could not see the fine fibre inserted upwards into her brain. Nor could she feel the viruses being laid down in her visual cortex or the dozen other implants in her body.

Afterwards, one of the young male techs helped her dress, then brought her juice to drink and told her to lie back and recuperate. Karyn closed her eyes, listening to the tech team tidying up then leaving quietly.

She had done it, taken the irreversible step. Phase Two. It was almost a relief. Gradually, she felt herself doze off.

She awoke with a start. The young tech was leaning over her. "What?" she said.

"Uh— Doctor Foster would like to see you." He looked pale, more nervous than before.

"Who?" Karyn asked, trying to get her mind in gear.

"The Medical Director. Um— Do you want a wheelchair?"

"I'm okay," Karyn said, swinging her legs off the couch.

"Take me to Foster."

As they walked down the corridor, Karyn asked the young guy why Foster wanted to see her. He gulped and said he didn't know.

At the Director's office, the youngster leaned around the jamb as the door slid open, announced Karyn and walked quickly away. She went in.

Foster was a large-boned Slavic-looking woman in her 40s. She gestured to one of the plush visitors' chairs.

"Thanks," Karyn said, sinking gratefully onto the nearest chair.

Foster looked at her. "Why didn't you tell us you were pregnant?"

Wild thoughts crashed through Karyn's mind. Her implant... Embryos floating in phials, centimetres from hellish *mu*-space energies...

"Don't worry, dear." Foster put a reassuring hand on Karyn's shoulder. "We can keep her — it's a girl — in cryostore till you're ready."

"No!" Karyn was on her feet instantly. The Phase Two viruses had already coursed through her body, beginning to rewire her visual cortex and perform a myriad concurrent tasks. What effect would that have on an unborn child?

There was at least one UN lab whose researchers would dearly love to find out.

"I think," Karyn said, "that my ship will have to wait a year. Don't you agree?"

Foster stared at her. "You can't jeopardize your career, not now. How much does it cost to keep a new ship out of commission for a year?"

"How much does it cost to train a pilot?" Karyn's response was automatic. Inside, awful doubts threatened to unbalance her. Calm. Centre yourself.

"— Impregnation seems to have occurred two months ago," Foster was saying. "You did receive information on the effects of Phase One treatment?"

The crystal she had dumped, while she went wandering the Medical Complex corridors in a daze, looking for Dart when she should have been recuperating. Chemical imbalances might well have deactivated her contraceptive implant. How could she have been so stupid?

"I've got to get back to campus," she said. "As required by regulations, I'll expect non-hazardous duty or immediate leave. I'll call Collins later."



Collins was the Flight Director.

"I'll call him myself, right now," Foster said.

"Fine." Heart pumping, Karyn turned and walked out quickly. What was she going to do?

As the door slid shut behind her, she heard Foster say, "You'll be blind by the end of the month, don't forget."

"Don't worry," Karyn said, alone in the comfortable reception lounge. "I won't forget."

Face burned by wind and the sunset's golden glow, Karyn turned her powerglide in towards the island she had launched from. The harness straps, tight around her shoulders, waist and thighs, creaked as the powerglide foil banked. Far below, blue and copper-oxide green waters of the Sea of Japan washed the island's caramel brown mountain peak.

A refrain ran continuously through her mind, in time with the wind's faint susurrating whistle, endlessly repeating a single word: Dart. Dart. Why was she flying? Was she trying to lose the baby? No, she wanted this baby for the sake of new life, not just so that Dart's memory would endure.

The island was growing larger below when a beeping sound caused adrenaline to wash through her. Karyn checked the airframe's tiny console. She was almost sick with relief when she realized it was her pendant making the noise.

"Karyn?" Sensei's voice.

"Here. Don't worry, I didn't go to the Honbu Dojo to work out, not in my condition." She was glad her pendant had no video, so he couldn't see what she was doing instead of martial-arts training.

"Listen, Karyn. We've had a message from Metronome Station."

"Oh no." The powerglide slipped sideways as she jerked. Slowly, Karyn brought it back under control.

Metronome Station had been Dart's destination.

"They didn't find his ship. What they found was a message buoy he managed to eject through to real-space though his ship's membrane was compromised." The strain in Sensei's voice was evident even through the sound of the slipstream. "He's in trouble, Karyn. In trouble in *mu*-space, and you're his best chance of rescue."

"Me?" Turmoil washed through her mind. "Sensei, leave me details, I'll check my messages in 20 minutes. Out." She thumbed off her pendant.

A chance to save Dart? But what about their unborn daughter?

Karyn tore the pendant from her neck and threw it into space, watching it dwindle then disappear beneath her, high above the ocean.

She came down in a long curving glide, focusing on the moment. When the beach came up beneath her, she neatly stalled the powerglide a metre above the sand, and dropped to earth. Then she unstrapped herself from the powerglide and left it, jogging slowly over the low dunes to the small ryokan inn where she was staying.

She hurriedly removed her shoes and went in to her room. Kneeling on the tatami mats, she placed the small porcelain-enclosed terminal on the mat in front of her, and logged on to the InfoNet.

Dart's message was anything but clear. His ship was

surrounded by vast shapes – ships? – which had partially tunnelled through his ship's horizon-membrane and neatly trapped him in place. Intelligent life in the *mu*-space continuum? His ship's system dump confirmed the status of his horizon-membrane. He was trapped.

Some of UNSA's best techs had come up with a strategy for escape, by strengthening the field used to form the horizon-membrane. In practice, that meant refitting another ship's field generators and sending out a rescue mission.

The silver bird took Karyn's breath away.

The holo showed a clean-lined silver ship, proud upon its runway. Karyn's ship, in the final stages of being configured to match her characteristics. The ideal ship for fitting out with extra field-generators.

A small red light indicated a message coming through in realtime. But Karyn needed no further persuasion.

Save Dart? Protect their child? Self-honesty forced her to face the truth. That ship was calling out to her, crying to be flown, yearning for the freedom of another universe. It was what she was born to do.

Karyn woke in darkness, with a dull pain where eyes had been. Sure hands lifted her from bed to wheelchair. Her limbs felt weak, yet there was no fear. Could anything worse happen? Someone gave the wheelchair a voice command, and it began to move. A bustle of footsteps, quiet urgent voices, the rustle of her escort's clothing.

"Where's Sensei?" she asked huskily.

"Waiting outside." A man's voice, soft.

Karyn could hear a distant argument, a surgeon unhappy that her patient was being moved so soon, someone explaining this was an emergency, the patient had agreed in advance, and so forth. The sound of conflict receded.

Outside, the air felt cool against her face. She was tilted back as the wheelchair climbed a ramp into a ground-effect vehicle.

"Karyn?" A calloused hand touched her forehead.

"Sensei. I won't forget. Centre. Balance."

"God bless." His voice was hoarse.

A rough warm tongue rasped against her hand.

"Yo, Barney."

"Good luck, Karyn." Maggie's voice.

"Thanks, friend."

A small jolt as the GEV halted, then the dizzy sensation of being raised high above the ground, the whine of an hydraulic lift. Cold air washed her nakedness as she was stripped by efficient professional hands. Then warmth as they lowered her deep into the bowels of her ship.

Softness enveloped her as the pilot's cocoon sealed her in. Probes and interface fibres insinuated themselves into her body, piercing her with pain. Her mouth opened in a silent scream as cold heavy liquid was pumped into her lungs. Sensor trunks, plugged into her eye-ports, were twin spears of pain driven into her brain. Beyond agony, the faint scratching sensation of data uploading into her systems.

Time seemed to stretch forever.

Insulated, she hardly felt the moment of ignition, the distant burning scream of her ship's thrusters. Under Flight Centre control, her ship was hurled along the runway then thrown into space, tearing upwards through the atmosphere and leaving it behind.

She was cocooned in dark warmth, a softness at the core of a great silver bird hanging in space. Centre. Balance. Blend with the data flow.

And then—

Then bright light burst through the synthesis of Karyn-plus-ship. As it faded, she was bathed in molten gold, immersed in golden light washed through with crimson streams. The heavens were threaded with fractal ebon necklaces, black stars like spheroid snowflakes, stretching to infinity. *mu*-space.

"My God."

Karyn's skin was the hull, the event membrane. One with her ship, she glided. With a flicker of effort, she soared through golden space.

"I'm coming, Dart."

She pushed harder. The nearer stars lost their spikey appearance, became flowing rivers of black light across a golden landscape.

Eight spongiform black spheres, massive stellar objects, clustered in golden space. As Karyn watched, ripples of golden light washed across the nearest sphere, spread to its neighbours, then faded rapidly. Communication? Through a small gap in the cluster, she could just see Dart: a tiny pinprick of bronze, lighter than its real-space colour, dwarfed by the jet-black fractal giants.

"Karyn?" A weak whisper over her comms link.

Slowly, the cluster began to tighten up.

"Quick, your status," Karyn said. "Can you infodump?"

"Negative. Membrane... failing."

"Shit."

Then Dart was hidden from sight, buried at the cluster's heart.

"Talk to me, Dart."

Nothing.

"Centre. Balance." Talking to herself.

She had lectured about projections like an expert. Time to find out the truth. Grimly, she initiated the translation sequence, the coherent tunnelling effect plunging her back into cold black night.

Real-space.

She was blind. Only her interface with the ship's navigational co-processors, already an integral part of her, gave her any sense of physical location. Karyn turned her attention inwards, to her own schematics. Excess mass in her holds. Her internal robot arms rapidly cut away extraneous fittings with their lasers and ejected the lot. Useless seats and lifting gear floated in space, invisible to her now.

No more delays. She had the makings of five years' worth of nutrients. Her chances of success were increased by a geometry where smaller meant denser, where she could project herself like a small distorted shadow.

Centre. Balance.

Karyn broke through.

Where concepts lay beyond thought...

The new intruder was smaller, faster, speeding through the lower levels and heading for the large intruder which was undergoing absorption.

The event-pattern struggled to copy its capture technique to the lower levels, but the second intruder was following a complex spiralling path.

Chaotic forms rippled through the event-pattern's growing awareness.

The strain of holding her warped configuration was immense. Indigo stars – in accordance with her vision-analogue's reversed logic – in a blue and turquoise sea dwarfed her. Pain would be her constant companion over the coming months, but she dare not use anaesthetics. There was more than her own health to consider, especially over a long period. For her flight duration was unpredictable in a universe where time and space grew larger the closer you examined them.

"I'm coming, Dart."

Dart, impaled by streamers of *mu*-space energy tunnelling through his weakened horizon-membrane, scarcely aware of what was happening, knew only that Karyn was coming to save him.

At the edge of his perception, he detected a minute dark projectile ripping like a bullet through the outer edge of a spongiform sphere, spattering gouts of black stellar matter into golden space.

Karyn.

The cluster of spheres began to contract – but slowly, far too late. Karyn's tiny vessel arced in towards Dart and thudded against the side of his ship.

"Karyn?" he asked weakly.

"Yeah – ah, shit! It's starting!" Karyn's voice message, received as a blip, slowed and deciphered by his ship's co-processors.

"What?" Concern roused him. "They can tunnel through the membrane. Get out of here!"

"No, I'm – okay. I can – merge our membranes. Boost them, so – ah! – so can't tunnel through. Initiating."

"Karyn. Get away!"

"I'm okay. It's working."

The loops of *mu*-space energies, threaded through Dart's ship, slowly faded. He sensed what was happening without benefit of his vessel's equipment, sensed it in ways he could not describe. What was happening to him?

"Dart! Are you – okay?" Karyn's voice, gasping.

"I'm alright," he lied, feeling washed through with pain and weariness. "Are you injured?"

"No. I'm – ah – in labour. Your – child."

Lethargy dropped away from him. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Hang on."

Taking control of both their vessels, Dart began the coherent tunnelling sequence. *mu*-space grew indistinct around them.

He was about to become a father!

Not sentient, yet not unaware, in a place of neither/nor...

The event-pattern sensed strange interactions between the two intruders even as they grew increasingly opaque. It felt driven to investigate, and pushed harder at the strengthened barrier which surrounded the things.

A kind of joy as it felt the barrier giving way. Anticipation of absorption.

Karyn was glad to relinquish flight control after months of increasing pain. Deeply cocooned and intimately interfaced, her bodily awareness should have been minimal. Now, involuntary contractions were pulsing through her. Body and cocoon shifted as her pelvic region struggled to create a four-inch wide egress for her daughter.

An electric sensation passed through her.

"What's happening, Dart?"

There was an interminable wait for his reply, decoded by her co-processors. "Probing us."

"What? Oh – " Karyn suppressed a gasp. There was more to do. "Can you complete the sequence?"

"Negative. Not with loops of *mu*-space passing through us."

"Oh, God."

Karyn began shutting down her systems, diverting power to the field generators.

"Is it working?" she asked.

"Not yet."

Despair swept through her. "What else can we do?"

"Decrease the membrane area," said Dart. "I love you. Look after our child."

"No!" Karyn screamed.

Too late. He had acted before replying. Their ships separated and coral-like tendrils of black arced rapidly into Dart's ship, drawn to him as he phased out his horizon-membrane. Dart's ship dissolved into a million sparkling bronze snowflakes, which slowly faded, absorbed by the sea of golden light.

"Dart– "

Unaccountably, a feeling of protective warmth embraced her. Then it was gone, as the sequence completed and she was floating in cold blackness, devoid of golden light, utterly blind.

Real space.

Absorption...

The ship's co-processors pinpointed the location of Metronome Station, Dart's original destination. Too far. Karyn set course using fusion thrusters. She opened an audio channel and activated her emergency beacon. Then she forgot about her flight.

For 36 hours she writhed in dark agony, deep in her cocoon, convulsed with involuntary contractions. Long after her waters had broken – setting internal alarms screeching – the baby would not come, no matter how hard Karyn screamed with fluid-filled lungs and pushed with every weakened muscle.

No good. Desperately, she took control of her internal robot arms and used them to strip away cocoon material. She felt blood trickling, systems awareness dimming, as the arms pulled out interface cables to free her for movement. Hypertrophied muscles stretched painfully as she felt around her abdomen, guiding her hand with a robot arm for support.

Breech position. The baby was turned sideways and nothing would enable a normal delivery.

There was only one thing she could do. She brought another robot arm to bear, positioned it over her abdomen, and activated its laser.

Centre. Balance.

She drew the arm diagonally up and across her body, praying she had not miscalculated the incision. She was almost unconscious with pain, incapable of voluntary motion, but the arm's processors continued the movements she had initiated. One of the arms was clamped around her wrist, guiding her weakened grasp. Whimpering, she reached inside herself and drew out a warm wriggling bundle. As robot arms sealed her up, she held the baby close. A robot arm brought the end of a nutrient tube to rest near the baby's mouth.

Then she surrendered to pain, and dropped deep into coma.

Growth...

Time, a non-linear variable, passed more quickly on some scales of the mu-space continuum than others. Energy and entropy flowed as an entire universe, once stable but far from equilibrium, rippled with changes.

There was one astrophysicist on watch at Metronome Station, as it followed its stately orbit round the distant giant Delta Cephei. A shuttle was completing docking procedures after a long haul of laying sensor drones, already broadcasting data as they slowly fell into the great star. The astrophysicist patched through to the shuttle's crew.

"You're not going to believe this, guys," she said.

"Now what? Have we missed a party?"

"Listen. I've got a signal."

A loud wailing, overlaid by a distress beacon's beeping.

"What is that?"

"That, my friend, is a baby." The astrophysicist chuckled. "And it ain't a very happy one."

Karyn awoke in a soft bed, every muscle stiff and cramped. A man's voice was droning softly in prayer.

"You– " she croaked. "You'd better not be saying the Last Rites, you bastard."

"Karyn!"

"Sensei?"

A big calloused hand took hers. "Ah, Karyn. Thank God."

"For what?" She passed a hand across her non-existent eyes. "Where's – Where's my –?"

"Your daughter's next door. She's fine. You're on Metronome Station."

"Sensei. Dart is, he – died. Saving us."

"I know, child."

Karyn realized she was whimpering. She hunched up, curled into a foetal position on the bed, trembling uncontrollably.

Sensei's strong arm encircled her, and slowly the shivering subsided.

"Sensei," she said in a small voice, "Is my baby okay?"

He hesitated a little too long before answering, "Yes, fine."

"What's wrong with her?" Anger flashed through her mind. Why had she done it, taken risks when she was pregnant? But what else could she have done?

"Her eyes are – black," said Sensei. "Completely black, I mean. No surrounding white. It's a little disconcerting. But she is one hundred percent normal. I mean it."

"Thank you. Can I see her now?"

"Just a moment, dear."

She could hear Sensei leaning out of the doorway and calling to someone. Then he helped her to sit up straight in the bed. A damp cloth wiped some of the sweat off her face.

"Here you are." A strange woman's voice. "Who's going to see her mommy then?"

A warm bundle was placed in Karyn's arms. Awe filled her. She had created this person?

"She's fit and healthy," the woman said. "Ready for her trip to Earth."

"What?" said Karyn.

"Don't worry," said Sensei. "Not until after you've — returned to your ship."

Confusion swirled inside her. "How long have I been here?"

"Three days," said Sensei. "That's all. I arrived yesterday. You'll be here a while yet."

Karyn remembered her first breakthrough into *mu*-space, the heartbreaking beauty of the strings of dark stars, her effortless flight through glorious seas of golden light.

"Are ships travelling okay?" she asked.

"No trouble at all," said the woman's voice.

"None," Sensei agreed.

It was the answer she had expected.

"Sensei, my daughter and I will be coming back with you."

There was a sharp intake of breath from the woman.

"Karyn," said Sensei. "On Earth, you will never see again."

"I'm not afraid of the dark," Karyn said. After a pause, she added, "I'm not lying this time, Sensei."

"I know."

The baby squirmed in Karyn's arms, then began to cry. It was a thin wailing sound, impossible to ignore.

"That's what I heard when I was on watch," the woman said. "I'm Dorothy, by the way."

Karyn felt the brief clasp of the woman's hand.

"I'm Karyn. Thank you." She ran a gentle fingertip down her baby's face. The crying subsided as a tiny hand grasped her finger. A small warm mouth sucked at her fingertip.

"Dorothy's a nice name," said Karyn.

Time is a non-linear variable. It passed slowly for a young graduate student working his guts out on a thesis entitled *N-Dimensional Linguistic Representations of Interconnectedness and Feedback Loops*. The evaluating committee, when they awarded him his PhD, noted that it was the most original work they had considered in over a decade.

Jakar soon got used to being called Doctor Ravandi, and to being the rising young star of the UTech faculty. With a nicety of timing, he published his best work on Connectivity Theory just as it became the fashionable theme in academe and pop science, and his future was assured.

Fifteen years later, at the age of 36, he was appointed the youngest ever Head of School at UTech.

During that time, UTech maintained its close links with UNSA, even when the scandal broke over unethical experimentation and many of UNSA's own laboratories were temporarily shut down. Several Pilot Candidates came to teach as part of their final evaluation, and most of them went on to become *mu*-space pilots.

Neither they, nor any other UNSA pilots, experienced any untoward events in the *mu*-space continuum.



Maturation...

Time is a non-linear variable. In mu-space, wonderful energy patterns grew. Yet with the changes came self-awareness, fore-knowledge of the distant but inevitable end, when the new structures would dissipate and slide into the final equilibrium state, and all meaning would be lost forever.

At the heart of the sweetest of gifts, a bitter core.

The black-eyed girl, a slender 15-year old who was too pale and gaunt to be pretty, but who moved with a disconcerting sureness, was walking through the white airy rooms of the orphanage, through the Director's residence belonging to her mother. The rooms were high-ceilinged with wide arching windows which had been slid open to let the dry hot air indoors. Outside, the sun swept stone cloisters clean of shade and lay achingly bright upon the white flagstones.

As the girl walked, the image of a document moved through the air ahead of her. Not the slightest blur affected the image as she passed over the threshold of each room, as that room's inbuilt processor took over the task.

A small red icon showed below the image. The girl stopped. "Go ahead," she said.

The document was replaced by the image of a dark-skinned man, long black hair swept back from his forehead.

"Uncle Jak! How are you?"

"Hi, Dorothy." The man grinned. "I'm bloody marvellous. How are you?"

"Oh, fine." She smiled, a little shyly.

"I've got a present for you. Want to read it?"

"Yes, please."

The image of Jakar's head shrank and dropped down to one side as the document, a network of FourSpeak spreading through a spherical volume two metres in diameter, grew in the air in front of Dorothy. Above it hung the title, glowing white. Self Awareness in a Fractal Continuum.

"Wow," Dorothy said, scanning through it, the motion of her featureless jet-black eyes impossible to follow.

"Ah – Don't tell me you've read the whole thing already."

"Pretty much," Dorothy said. "Are you going to publish it?"

"And lose my tenure for writing gobbledygook?" Jakar's smile was sardonic. "No, I'm going to post it anonymously on a special interest board. I don't think any of the refereed boards would take it, anyway."

"Oh. That's their loss, Uncle Jak. May I download a copy?"

"Feel free. I'd be honoured."

"Great. Thanks." She nodded slightly, sufficient signal for the house system to perform the download.

"Listen, Dorothy, I've got to go. Teaching students face to face. Talk about old-fashioned." He rolled his eyes heavenwards.

"You love it, Uncle Jak. Take care."

"And you, dear." Jakar grinned again. "Give my love to your mother."

His image winked out of existence.

The class, ten men and three women, changed out of their sweat-stained training suits in their respective locker rooms, dragging themselves to the showers in stunned silence. Afterwards, dressed in UNSA jumpsuits, they made their way outside. They waited on a small paved area in front of the white stone buildings. Before them, a grassy slope dropped

steadily down to a distant valley floor. Below, a tiny ground-effect bus was crawling up the meadow towards them. All around, snow-tipped mountain peaks glinted under a pale blue sky.

"Awesome," said the biggest of the young men, running a hand through his damp hair. "She threw me around like a rag doll."

"Yeah," said one of the women. "You're only twice her bodyweight, you big gorilla. You should be ashamed of yourself."

They all laughed. At the end of the training session, their sensei – a slender grey-haired woman, with shining silver sockets where her eyes should have been – had asked the whole class to attack her simultaneously, any technique. She had tossed them around effortlessly, mostly into each other, until there was a pile of exhausted bodies on the mat and she was the only one standing.

A nun emerged from one of the white stone cloisters, clad in the hooded black suit of her order, holding two small children by the hand.

"It's the pilots," piped up one child. "They've been fighting with Sensei Karyn, haven't they, sister?"

"She beat the hell out of us," said one of the men, as the nun glared at him stonily. "Er – sorry, sister."

"You will be, young man," the nun said, with only the slightest of smiles. "The Lord understands. You know Karyn also travels to the Flight Centre to teach physics courses?"

A couple of the Pilot Candidates nodded.

"Probably nobody's told you, but Karyn's classes have the highest pass rate in UNSA. Even those who decide not to take the final step, always go far in their careers." She looked down. "Come along, children. You've got lessons to go to."

She took the children inside.

"Hard as nails," said the big man. "The whole lot of them."

The UNSA bus pulled up in front of them and settled softly onto the ground. The thirteen Pilot Candidates trooped aboard, bone weary, exhausted as hell, yet somehow brimming with confidence.

The bus rose up on its cushion of air, then slowly made its way down the grassy emerald slope.

A crystal dome ceiling, bisected by a single sweeping white spar, bathed the airy training hall in a spectacularly limpid light. Outside, snow-tipped mountain peaks beneath a sapphire sky. The light lent an eerie sheen to the white jackets of the two warriors, kneeling facing each other. Their black hakama trousers, like split skirts, looked carefully arranged, as though they were about to begin a tea ceremony. On the floor nearby lay two swords of heavy polished wood, and a wooden dagger.

The slender black-eyed girl launched a fast open-hand strike but the grey-haired eyeless woman moved up on one knee into the attack, blended with it, and pinned the attacking arm to the floor. She released her daughter, and both returned to their kneeling positions.

Dorothy launched a dozen more attacks, each one trapped and redirected with exquisite precision by her mother. Then they reversed roles, Karyn delivering the same strikes while Dorothy defended with almost equal skill.

As they moved onto weapons, they both became aware of the nun standing at the back of the dojo, with two small

children trying very hard to be quiet. They continued practice regardless, as the children grew bored and the nun took them away.

Finally, Karyn struck with the wooden dagger at Dorothy, who took her mother through four changes of direction before throwing her into the floor. As Dorothy stepped back, the dagger had transferred itself almost magically into her hand.

It was the last attack. Dorothy put the dagger down, then both of them knelt and bowed to each other formally, foreheads almost touching the floor.

"Thank you, Dorothy," Karyn said. As she moved her head, the sun glinted off the metal sockets where her almost-forgotten eyes had been. "In a few years, you'll be pretty good."

In most contexts, it would have sounded patronizing. In the martial arts, coming from the highest-graded female aikidoka outside Japan, it was the highest praise possible.

"I don't think so, mother." Dorothy stood as Karyn rose. "You noticed Sister Francis Xavier watching us?"

"Of course," said Karyn, knowing what Dorothy was leading up to.

"You're in charge. You can staff this place with anyone you want. Why them?"

Karyn stepped forwards and put a hand unerringly on Dorothy's narrow shoulder. "They can be real bitches, can't they?"

"But good teachers. All right, mother, I give in."

They embraced tightly. Karyn felt Dorothy kiss her cheek, and returned the gesture.

"I'm going to shower," Karyn said.

"I'd like to meditate for a while," said Dorothy.

"Don't –"

"– Fall asleep," Dorothy finished. "I won't." Both of them chuckled, recalling the time Dorothy had done just that.

Dorothy knelt as Karyn walked off the mat. At the doorway, Karyn paused. "The nuns," she said. "They have discipline and a moral code, you know? Even though it's based on fear of their God, on pure illusion."

"Yeah. Okay. See you later, mother."

Karyn left the dojo with a light step and a smile upon her lips. She went out into a small garden, breathed deeply of its fresh green smells, rejoicing in the sun's warmth upon her face.

Back inside the dojo, Dorothy knelt at the centre of the mat, straight-backed and apparently serene. Her eyes, featureless orbs of jet, were open.

"Illusion," she said suddenly, voice ringing in the empty dojo. As she spoke, golden fire coruscated across the black surface of her eyes. "Maybe that's all their God is."

As the echo of her words faded, so did the ripples of golden light, until her eyes were dark once more, deep as the night, pitiless as death, as unknowable as tomorrow.

John Meaney's previous stories for *Interzone* are "Spring Rain" (issue 61), "Sanctification" (issue 69), "Timeslice" (issue 75) and "Sharp Tang" (issue 82). He lives in Kent and works in computers.

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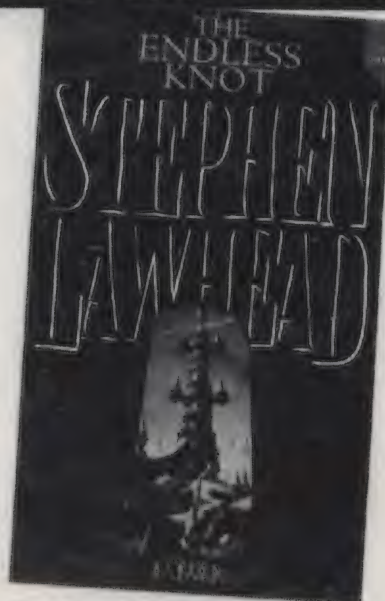
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A Ring of GREEN FIRE

Sean McMullen



As I was travelling through Westbury forest, I met with a man with a ring of green fire around his penis," Avenzoar's visitor said casually.

The poet-physician looked up at his friend and stroked his beard, then gazed wistfully across to the partially built minaret of Caliph al-Mansur's huge mosque.

"Such a wonder," sighed Avenzoar, then turned to his visitor and raised an eyebrow. "I suppose you did not bring him here for this poor physician and poet turned bureaucrat to examine?"

His friend glanced away, and seemed troubled. "Alas, it was not possible."

"Such a pity. It may be an honour to be entrusted with the completion of this great mosque of Ishbiliyah, but I miss the wider world. Is England really such a cold, rainswept place?"

"When I was there, yes."

"What of your patient? Was he a traveller from even more exotic regions?"

"Not at all, yet the story of his curse is fascinating."

Avenzoar clapped his hands. Honey pastries and ripe fruit were brought in by a servant and placed before them.

"My friend, show kindness to a captive of the Caliph's goodwill and tell me this magical story."

"There was no magic, Avenzoar, nor was the curse any more than an exotic disease. Still, the story will afford you an hour's wonder."



How to begin? Affliction with the green fire was growing common in the midlands of England in the Christian year of

1188. The man in Westbury forest was a tinker, I saw that from his pack. He approached a tollbridge where I was resting in the dim light of late evening, and he drew his cloak tightly about himself as he came near.

His name was Watkin, and he was a small, thin but very energetic man, a little over 30 years of age. I introduced myself as a physician, and offered him the protection of my five men-at-arms while we camped for the night. He was glad to accept, as the forest was full of outlaws and we had also rigged a shelter against the rain. As we ate the night's meal I raised the subject of illness with him.

"You have an affliction, I can tell that," I said. He made no reply, yet his face was sad. He shaved slivers of cheese from a rind with his knife but did not eat them.

"Your affliction is distressing; but without pain," I continued. "I have learned to read the signs of distress in sick people."

He tossed the rind into the fire and wiped his knife on a crust. "You have never seen the like of my complaint," he said miserably. "Nobody can help me. I went to the physicians of the Church and they said that I was possessed by a devil. They wanted to torture me until it was driven out, but I'd have none of that. I broke free and ran. I run very fast."

"Wise of you, but there are other ways."

"I'm afeared of witchcraft too."

"I am no sorcerer, I am a physician who has studied under some of the greatest Moorish and Jewish masters of the day, including Maimonides himself."

"Who is Maimonides?"

"Ah, a great Jewish teacher and man of medicine. He is

court physician to the great Saladin."

"Saladin! So... you have Moorish training."

"Why yes. I went to the Holy Land with the Crusade of 1147. I was badly wounded, then captured. The enemy physicians tended me so well that I resolved to learn their ways."

"You place no faith in torture to rid a man of demons?"

"Oh no, I have been trained in far more civilized means."

"Then I'll show you –"

"No! Wait, and let me examine you first. I wager that I can tell your affliction in moments."

I felt the glands beneath his jaw, looked into his eyes in the firelight and sniffed his breath. He was in good health, I could see that at once, yet I had to make a show of skill to gain his trust. He did not realize that I have acute vision at a distance, and had noticed a faint green glow through the cloth of his trews before he had wrapped himself in his cloak.

"You have a circlet of green fire about your penis,"

I announced calmly. "It has been slowly moving higher, and in its wake your skin has lost all feeling."

He gasped, then looked down to see if his glow was showing, which it was not. "Truly a man of great medical arts," he said in awe. "What – what are your fees? I'm but a poor tinker, yet I'd give anything to be rid of the fire and numbness."

I laughed disarmingly. "I have yet to meet a rich tinker, but do not worry. Your earnings for the week past will suffice. Open your robes, lower your trews, let me see your affliction."

His ring was brighter than any others that I had seen, and had moved so far up the shaft that it was almost at the base and glowed through his pubic hair. My companions looked up from their meal in surprise.

"Can you break this spell?" Watkin babbled eagerly. "Have you seen the like before?"

"Ah yes, and I have had great success where all others have failed."

He sighed with relief. "So, you have secret incantations and philtres, perhaps?"

"I have those, but they are for later. The real mode of breaking a spell is to learn the circumstances of its casting in the fullest detail possible. An honest, truthful account of the casting weakens the grip of the devil, who is behind all curses and spells. One lie, one slight deviation from the truth, however, and his grip is strengthened. How did you acquire your ring, Watkin?"

"It ... appeared a month ago, after I bedded my wife, and each time that I enjoy her it moves a little higher –"

"Stop, stop," I laughed. "Three lies within one breath! Watkin, you will have to do better than that. The ring of green fire begins at the tip of one's member and moves higher only when you bed a woman for the first time. It also becomes brighter as time passes. In women the glow is all internal, yet there is also numbness and other such effects that increase with time and new lovers. I would say that you acquired it around May last year, and since then you have mounted eight dozen women. As to being married, no, not you. Am I wrong?"

He slowly shook his head and stared at his boots. "To my shame, no."

"Then tell the truth, however reproachful your conduct has been."

"It would burn the ears of a good Christian."

"But Watkin, I am not a Christian." He gaped at me. "When I was in the Holy Land I adopted more than the medical scholarship of Islam. Now tell me of how you were first snared by the ring, and tell the truth."

"It was in a village called Delmy, to the south, near the coast. I arrived there early one afternoon, during the May festival. The villagers were celebrating the victory of summer over winter with feasting, May carols and dancing. Strangers were welcome, especially an honest tinker like myself."

"For a time I sampled the tartlets, manchets, fried figs and ales, then I turned my thoughts to a companion for a little frolic. I'd been travelling for a long time, I was lonely, it was spring –"

"I am not too old to know the needs and urgings of the flesh, Watkin. Go on."

"It seemed easy pickings. Many young folk of the village were dancing and fondling most intimately, raising my hopes of a quick and easy conquest. Alas, no girl would spare me the deeper smile, indeed there seemed no girls unpaired at all. After so long tramping the road I was lonely, and with so many pairs of lovers cavorting before me I was quite beside myself to be part of it."

"At last I saw one girl who was unpaired, a big-boned, hairy-armed wench with a face that only a beard could have improved. She was alone, tending the tables, and she smiled broadly whenever I came near. At first it seemed worse to mount her than no wench at all, yet the fire of spring burned within me. I made up my mind, approached her, whispered words of compliment, then with unseemly haste did I shepherd her away from the fair – more in shame of being seen with her than in shame of the act to come. I chose a place among bushes behind a broad oak. I – I could not bear to look upon her, I just bent her over a rack of poles and flung her skirts up."

He paused for a long drink from the crock. "And you did the deed with her?" I prompted.

"Ah yes, master physician, and she was a virgin, wouldn't you know it? Hah, it was wearisome work, yet I am a diligent tradesman. To the beat of the distant village band, I placed my rivet and began tapping. At last I was spent. I eased back as she stood panting, then I slipped away as if I had been a wood sprite vanishing into air – lest she have thoughts about wedding me. I skirted the village, took up my pack and trotted away briskly."

"By evening I was five leagues gone and some way contented. My hammer had been well worked, in fact he even felt a little numb, so hard had I clinked the pan – or so I thought. Imagine my alarm when I unlaced to piss and saw a ring of cold, faint green fire encircling his head."

"The girl was a virgin, you say?"

"Indeed, no doubt of it, I have initiated many. Alas, she passed this cold glow to me, and soon I noticed that as I worked the pots of goodwives and maids on my travels, the ring would move a little further up each time. Where it had been the feeling that is lust's reward was no more."

"But surely the women you have bedded since then noticed your green glow?"

"Ah no master, you are obviously not a tradesman. We visit houses and cottages during the day, when the menfolk are in the fields and their women are at home, alone. Most times will there be a sly look, or even a saucy suggestion,

then we will be coupled on the hearthrug in the light of day. Since the ring was slipped upon me, I have shared the glow to, oh, 95 women, mostly lowborn, though some were of no mean rank." He nudged me, winking suavely. "Master, if foolish knights would do no better than fight and drink, well someone must plant the seeds of future knights."

"One last question, Watkin. Could you write down the names and villages of all the women that you have bedded since the stout maid gave you the green fire?"

"Alas, Master, I cannot write, yet I could recite the names of all! When I lie alone at night I like to recall each wench that I have ever mounted and set a name against a star, but of late the number of stars has grown insufficient. Since the stout virgin of Delmy there have been ... now let me think ... one hundred and five, yes. Ah, but it is becoming difficult now, as so much of my hammer has no feeling."

Without any warning I seized his wrist and twisted his arm hard behind his back. He cried out in surprise and pain as I shouted: "A firebrand! A firebrand! Quickly!"

My men at arms jumped to their feet at once but Watkin tumbled in mid-air, twisted his arm free of my grip and darted for the woods with the speed of a startled hind. Worse luck for him, the sentry had been alert for just such a flight. His hand-axe went spinning flat after him, tangled his legs and sent him sprawling in the mud with a cry of pain. We soon had him in hand and dragged him back to the fire.

"A good throw, Sir Phillip," I said as they held him down and I tended the gashes and cuts in Watkin's legs. "The great tendon is severed in his right leg, he will never again run from cuckolded husbands with such speed."

Watkin's moaning suddenly died away as he realized that something else was not as it seemed. Beneath their shabby robes my men-at-arms were well-dressed warriors with fine weapons. They stood before us, glaring, their eyes sparkling with fury in the firelight.

"What – who are you?" the tinker stammered.

One of the men began to unlace, and the others followed his example. A moment later the light of five rings of green fire glowed steadily from their loins.

"Lied ... you lied to me!" gasped Watkin.

"Lied, Watkin? I am indeed a physician and breaker of curses, and my faith is the Way of Islam."

"Then who are these men?"

"You may call this man Sir Robert," I said as he brought a coil of rope to tie the tinker's hands. "This fine, burly warrior is Sir Peter, and Sir Phillip was the sentry who brought you down. Sir Charles is the blonde man, and Sir Douglas has the black beard and is scowling as if he would cheerfully cut your heart out. You may call me William."

"Those are not your real names," he said fearfully.

"Those names will suffice for you, false or not. Speaking for myself, I really am an Englishman, and although I do have an Islamic name now, I was christened William when I was born. I have returned to England at the request of Sir Peter here."

"A Christian physician could well have had us denounced or burned for demonic possession," Sir Peter explained. "Some folk afflicted by the green fire have already suffered such a fate. This infidel, who is also my friend, can be trusted not to do that. On your feet now!"

The nobles tied him spreadeagled in the rain between two trees. "False physician, you betrayed me!" wailed Watkin.

"And how many women did you betray by passing the green fire on to them?" I asked.

"No, no, I have ceased to spread the green fire," he cried. "Look in my pack."

"You certainly have," I agreed as I rummaged through his goods. "Just look at these knick-knacks. All manner of little presents as might please a wench and entice her into bed. Aromatic oils and scents, and, and... less savoury items."

There it was, in his pack, the cursed device. I sat back, and examined the sheath while my companions cheerily tormented Watkin with what was to come. With such a plague as the green fire to be caught from casual dalliance it was only a matter of time before these sheaths of sheepgut became very popular. Still, that was not my concern. Watkin was the man I had been seeking, the Alpha firebrand, the butterfly king. The plague of green fire was about to end and he would play a role.

I stood up. Sir Douglas had just proposed a crude surgical operation to rid Watkin of his green fire and the others were roaring their approval. "Stop! Stop!" I shouted, rushing forward to seize Sir Peter's arm. "My good lords, this one is not to be killed."

"But he's the one who began it all," exclaimed Sir Peter, so hot with anger that the rain steamed from his face.

"Precisely. Other firebrands may be killed for spreading the green glow, but this one might well be used for a cure."

Their hard and vengeful glares were at once softened by amazement and hope. Even revenge took second place to removing the glowing green shackle from their manhood.

Watkin was bound, gagged and bagged, then taken to Sir Peter's castle some 70 miles away. The journey was done in a single stretch, with no sleep, and even meals were had in the saddle. It rained for most of the way. The castle was no great wonder: it was a mean, low fortification of rammed earth, logs and stone blocks from ancient Roman ruins. The thatch and log roofs leaked, and it rained most of the time that I was there.

Although surly at first Watkin became wonderfully co-operative after a single touch of the torturer's red-hot iron. We wrote down the details of his 105 seductions, and in the weeks that followed established that only 62 of the infected women had survived beatings by their husbands and attempts at exorcism by religious healers. Ten had escaped ensnarement by the green ring since he had begun to use his sheepgut armour.

In the months past we had travelled far and wide killing firebrands who had spread the green fire, and thanks to the fire their trails were easy to follow. With Watkin safely in chains we now visited Delmy, the village from where he had borne the green fire to torment the world. The stout virgin that Watkin had seduced was named Gerelde, but while she was indeed not comely, she was skilled with herbal cures and was a surpassing good cook.

Her mother was buried nearby. The woman had once lived alone in a forest some way up the coast, and was reputed to have been a witch. Cornish brigands had raided the area and seized her, and their leader had ravished her until she was some months swelling with his child. He had then taken her out to sea and cast overboard to drown, yet she lived to struggle ashore and be found by the villagers of Delmy. The

village midwife said that she had treated herself with a glowing green paste to ease the pain of the birth. It was a difficult delivery, as Gerelde was a very big baby for such a small mother as she was. The witch had died of the stresses of birth and cursing her ravisher.

Sir Peter assembled a squad of men while I went with Sir Phillip to locate the witch's house, a ransacked shell by now. We exhumed the witch's bones and reburied them in the overgrown garden of her old home. In the meantime Sir Peter had attacked and annihilated the brigand stronghold, avenging the witch after 18 years. Every one of his fighting men had the ring of green fire and was frantic for revenge against anyone connected with it.

On the evening that we returned to Sir Peter's castle, I spoke with him in his dining hall. Rain dripped from the roof beams as we sat before the fire.

"That was clever work, finding the first firebrand of the green ring," he said to me. "Why didn't you tell us that we were on such a quest?"

"If I had told that I wanted a man of such-and-such a description you would have tortured dozens into confessing to be him. Better to take you on a vendetta against all firebrands and do the questioning myself."

"Well then, what good came of it? We avenged the witch, yet her magical ring still glows on my gronnick, and the ring on Watkin the Tinker is still bright enough to light his way on a moonless night. What sort of a sorcerer are you –"

"I am a physician, not a sorcerer. Magic does not exist, only illness in all its guises. The full cure for the ring of green fire is close. I have made progress."

"What kind of progress?"

"I returned the witch's bones to her garden and reburied them there. A month has passed since then, so the aura from her bones will have permeated the roots of her herbs and be taken up into the leaves. I shall soon return to her grave and harvest some leaves to grind into a paste."

"Will that be enough? Leaves?"

"There is more, Sir Peter, much more. Even though she is dead she is trying to teach us something of the new notion of chivalry – it's new to you English at least, us Saracenic scholars have taught it for years."

"That's why we employed you, dammit!"

"And your faith in me is not misplaced. I can see some kind of symbolism of pain being avenged while its resulting sorrow still lives on. The witch wanted you to do more than just avenge her."

"Well what did she damn well want?" shouted Sir Peter, pounding the table so hard with his goblet that a gemstone fell out of the silver filigree.

"Patience, patience, I dare not tell you everything yet."



Sir Peter had a mistress as well as his wife, and it was this woman that Watkin had bedded one afternoon in the summer passed. The noble had argued with her a little earlier, and she felt lonely and neglected. Watkin had arrived, and cleverly spoke in a cultivated voice, as if by accident. Then he hinted that he was himself a noble on some secret mission, and so he won her trust and bedded her. Understandably, Sir Peter was all for impaling Watkin on a stake at the castle gate until the crows pecked his bones

clean, but I restrained him.

"Why do you have such sympathy for the little wretch?" asked Sir Phillip the next morning as we squelched our way through the muddy grounds of the castle, holding sodden cloaks up against the rain. We were on our way to visit the tinker.

"Sympathy? I have no sympathy for Watkin, but I do have a use for him."

"The talk is that you are sorry for him."

"Sorry? Me? Not likely. I once suffered because of his kind. I was a young merchant's scribe in love with my master's daughter. Although she cared for me, our courtship was slow. I did not have skill with the words and gestures of seduction. My master took her on a journey to Normandy, he had trade business there. She met one such as Watkin, but this youth was a noble. He charmed her with talk as sweet as a nightingale's song, and settled upon her as softly as a butterfly. When she returned to England she grew round with child, and was desolate with remorse. I petitioned to marry her and the merchant consented, yet even then I was aflame with rage.

"I travelled to Normandy and sought out her seducer. Although a mere scribe I was skilled in the use of shortwords. I killed a guard and wounded several more, but the butterfly nobleman escaped and I was wounded. I became a fugitive and outlaw, I could never return to my young wife. She gave birth some months later, then flung herself from a cliff and was drowned in the sea."

"When did all this take place?"

"Your Christian year of 1150."

"But that was three years after the Crusade of 1147."

"Certainly. With a history like mine, would you let the truth be known? I began working aboard merchant ships, they were always in need of people who could write. After five years I had earned enough silver and learned sufficient Arabic to settle in the Zangid Sultanate and study medicine. I had an impressive wound, so I made up that tale of being on the crusade. Now you know my background, Sir Phillip. Please preserve my secret, yet reassure your folk about my intentions. A butterfly killed my sweetheart, and Watkin is another such butterfly."

"But why do you stay Sir Peter's hand?"

"As I said, Watkin has his uses. Although a mere tinker he is magnificent, the ultimate seducer. He can affect the voices and manners of all types of people, from nobles to ploughmen. His treads have a double strap, so that he can lower them to his knees for a dalliance, yet they stay high enough for him to run unencumbered from an outraged husband. He is a master of escape and could run like the wind until your axe severed his hamstring. He cleans his teeth with soft bark, he washes, and he scents himself with aromatic oils. His trade is tinkering, yet even that takes him roving to meet an endless bevy of women."

We had reached the dungeon, a squat blockhouse of stone with a log roof and narrow slits for windows. I made to enter, but Sir Phillip barred my way. "I'm with Sir Peter, I'm for killing the little rat," he declared. "He –"

"He seduced a maid on intimate terms with your seneschal, and your seneschal then passed the fire on to his wife – who was already your secret lover. If the green fire has done anything, it has traced out a fine trail of humperly bumperly at all stations of society."

"So what are you saying? Are we no better than Watkin?"

"I am saying that you can learn from Watkin. In spite of being a short, scrawny, low-born tinker, he charms greatly." "He preys upon the most vulnerable of women."

"True, but were you English noblemen to clean your teeth, change your clothing at least weekly and take the care to give ladies little compliments instead of kicks, curses and belches, why the likes of Watkin would have no market for their charms. He is poor, but it costs him nothing to speak charmingly and wash. If you did the same, you would still be rich and powerful as well. Who would then choose Watkin over you? A hot iron can wound Watkin's type, but with good manners and clean fingernails you can hurt them a lot more. You English are adopting our Saracenic cooking, mathematics and music. Why not our chivalry as well?"

Sir Phillip glared at me from under his cloak, but he was obviously thinking.

"There is a lot of merit in what you say ... but it's hard to think chivalrous thoughts with a ring of green fire about my gronnick! What can I do about that?"

"The tinker took a curse upon himself when he bundled into the witch's daughter. He then dispersed that curse to nearly every woman he seduced in his travels, and hence to all their lovers. That has formed quite an avenging army."

"And we did avenge her!"

"Yes, but there is more to it than that, so the glow remains. The green fire is a tool to force us to do certain tasks, and even teach us about the ways of men and women."

We entered the dungeon, where the tinker was practicing walking with a crutch and in good spirits.

"Have you caught the Delmy witch?" he asked.

"We found her grave and exhumed it. She is naught but bones after these 18 years."

"Eighteen years? Bones? She was as well fleshed as a prize sow when I mounted her the May before last."

"That was her daughter. The witch herself died in childbirth, but her daughter unknowingly carried a curse. You turned that curse loose upon the world. Gerelde was raised by a peasant family, and has come to be a fine cook. I tasted her food, it was fine fare for a peasant table. She wants for naught but a husband. She's plain of face and is built as solidly as Sir Peter, yet for all that she is a kindly girl."

Watkin sneered. "Why are you telling me about her? I'd never touch her again, she's as ugly as a goat's backside."

"She was quite taken by you, Watkin, and she is very concerned that you are imprisoned here. Still, you are more fortunate than the brigand who raped her mother. Sir Peter caught him, did you know? He was a great slab of a man, massive rather than fat, full of life and defiance, even 18 years after the deed that caused all this. He was confident that we would not kill him because he knew where sundry hoards of gold and silver loot lay buried. Sir Peter had him taken to the graveside of his victim, and there his gronnick was sliced from between his legs and rammed down his windpipe so that he choked on it and died most horribly. Those of his men as were watching quickly babbled the location of hoards of coin, plate and jewellery, yet none heeded them. Sir Peter had to kill him with the same weapon that killed Gerelde's mother."

Watkin was deathly pale by now, and had slumped against the wall. "Mother of God, but why?"

"He was a link in the chain that ignited the green fire. You are another link."

"Me? But, but –"

"You bedded Sir Peter's mistress. That alone should have you in fear for your life, but you also passed the fire to her."

The tinker cowered, but said no more. Sir Phillip lurked in the shadows, smirking at his discomfort.

"I need tears of pity that have been wept for you and no other. In all the world, Watkin, would anyone weep for you?"

"Many regard me as comely."

"Someone must *weep* for you, Watkin. Your flesh is about to hiss with the touch of the red iron."

"No! As God is merciful, no! Take my pack, sell me into slavery! I'll do anything –"

"For the final ingredient to quench the ring of green fire you *will* be able to choose between death and a less daunting fate, but for now you will be tortured. I require that it be done, Watkin, and believe me that there are thousands of men and women who would fight to the death for the pleasure of holding the glowing iron to you. You have often been bold, now you must learn to be brave."

Once we were well away from the dungeon and Watkin's hysterical pleading Sir Phillip took me by the arm.

"That brigand was killed in battle by one of Sir Peter's archers. It was a shaft through his skull, he died at once."

"True."

"Then what was that story about choking him on his own gronnick?"

"Watkin has the attention span of a butterfly. I meant to... focus his mind."

"To what end?"

"That is between myself and Allah. Rest assured, however, that Watkin will be tortured."

"And you will savour his screams with the rest of us?"

"Oh no, I shall be hard at work, preparing certain ingredients to quench the ring of green fire."

"Lord physician, I don't follow."

"You will never follow, Sir Phillip, but your ring of green fire shall be quenched, rely on my word for that."



By the time I had left Sir Peter's castle for Delmy, Watkin had faced the first of the silent, hooded men who were to torment him. Thousands gathered outside the castle to hear his screams, but these did not last. After he was blinded, the tendons at the source of his voice were cut. This produced such a riot outside that all Watkin's subsequent tortures had to be on public display. As I rode off for Delmy hot irons were being applied to the soles of his feet by the second torturer, Sir Douglas, while Sir Phillip held up a cloak to keep the rain from cooling the red-hot metal.

I returned after three days, bringing Gerelde with me. Watkin was, of course, the only lover she had ever known, so he was a lot more special to her than the other way about. She was blind to his disfigurements, and she made heartfelt pleas for her feckless tinker. It was an impressive sight, for even on her knees she was taller than Sir Peter. I stood by and collected her tears on a small cloth. At a nod from me Sir Peter relented – on the condition that Watkin marry her, and that he never leave the village of Delmy under pain of death by torture. Watkin could only nod his head by way of

agreement. Now Gerelde wept tears of joy, and I wiped these from her face as well.

A great marriage feast was held, and a good many folk with the ring of green fire were brought in to participate. Before Sir Peter's eyes I ground the cloth with its tears into a paste, then added cuttings of herbs taken from the witch's garden. The food at the feast was wonderful village fare, and to this I added my mixture. All ate heartily, and by evening the green fire was gone from every afflicted man and woman at the feast. There were, well, unseemly celebrations in spite of the rain, but that was only to be expected. The following day I called upon Sir Peter.

"Now that the curse is broken, a simple remedy can be used to quench the green fire in all others who still have it," I told him. "I have trained several clerks and midwives in its preparation already, and they will train more. Soon the green fire will be no more, so my work here is done."

Sir Peter embraced me so strongly that I heard the joints of my spine pop. I was the physician who had returned the feeling to his penis, and he was brimming with gratitude.

"You must have a reward, honours, you have done more good for this land than words can say."

"There is my agreed fee, of course."

"That? A mere trifle! Here's twice your fee." He tossed me a bag of gold. "Now, my Lord physician, if you could but renounce the faith of Islam you could also be given great rank."

"My faith is Islam, please respect that, and rank does not interest me. I am a physician, so although I find it an honour to treat caliphs and kings, I do not aspire to their thrones."

"Then treat a king you will! Our King Henry lies sick at Chinon, a town in his French provinces. I'm his trusted adviser, I'll recommend you to him, I'll recommend you in the very highest words of praise."

"I would be honoured to treat your king, Sir Peter."



Avenzoar gazed at the fountain in the centre of the courtyard for some moments before turning back to his guest. The constant rain, the glowing green fire, all the strange horrors of his visitor's tale slowly retreated before the warm Spanish sunshine.

"So the girl's tears broke the curse," he said.

"No. My 'other remedy' would have worked by itself."

"Then you could have stopped the green fire months earlier. Why the charade?"

The visitor paused to select a ripe fig, frowning as if troubled. "I was Watkin's first torturer." Avenzoar gasped with surprise. "Yes, I blinded him to Gerelde's face and I silenced his voice that he might never abuse her."

"I see. You made him a match for her and no other."

"I did more than that. The ring of green fire was a type of purgative, it flushed out those men with great skill in coldly manoeuvring women into bed. Watkin was not the only firebrand, we discovered nearly two dozen men, and a few women too, who had hundreds of seductions behind them. They are all dead now, save for Watkin. Many other diseases are spread by the loveless lust of Watkin's kind. We culled in the interests of good health."

Avenzoar considered this. "True, too much of any skill can be dangerous. Perhaps the witch did some good after all."

"The witch was no witch, and there was no curse. She was

my dead wife's daughter, sired by a butterfly and born just before her mother cast herself into the ocean. Gerelde was my step-granddaughter, but even though she and her mother were no flesh and blood of mine, I loved them as my own. I provided for them and visited them every few years."

"Ah yes, now it all makes sense. The green fire was a medicine to deaden the pain of childbirth. Your step-daughter died before she could give the antidote to herself and her baby. The fire escaped when Watkin mounted Gerelde."

The visitor nodded. Avenzoar stood up slowly and looked across to the delicate tracery and interlaced arches of the partly built minaret. He glanced at a nearby sundial.

"It is time for my daily inspection of the minaret," he said with his back to his guest, then he turned. "But first I must reproach you for mutilating in the name of medicine."

The guest remained calm, as if expecting the outburst, yet he did not meet Avenzoar's eyes. "No, not in the name of medicine. I disfigured Watkin to have my step-granddaughter married and happy. She has a lame, blind, mute tinker who is nevertheless a prince of seducers, and she has him all to herself. He will be grateful for all that she does for him until the day he dies. Yes, it was evil of me, but perhaps good has come of it. Watkin's wings have been clipped, but at least he has his life."

Avenzoar sat down and fanned himself. "But what of my original question? You have not yet explained why you took so long to release your cure for the green fire? Surely it was not just to mark and slay the promiscuous?"

"You are right, Avenzoar, as usual. I withheld the cure to increase its worth. That increased my reward, in turn."

"Reward? To treat King Henry? It must have been of little comfort to you. I learned recently that he died barely a fortnight after midsummer."

"Precisely," the visitor agreed solemnly, and Avenzoar felt a sudden chill in spite of the bright sunshine. "As a teenage prince in Normandy he seduced my sweetheart. I spent a lifetime hating that royal butterfly, yet it was the accidental spread of the green fire that gave me a chance to get past his guards. Gerelde is his granddaughter, yes, and Watkin is unknowingly married to a princess."

He reached into his robes and took out a folded parchment, which he placed on the tray beside the pastries. "This details a cure for the mould that causes the ring of green fire," he said as he stood up. Avenzoar unfolded the parchment and read it slowly. Finally he nodded, and looked up at his guest in silence. "Well, are you not going to censure me for killing a king?"

"To what end?" Avenzoar replied wearily. "You always have the best of reasons for your behaviour."

"Once more you are wrong," replied the visitor, but this time without his mask of smug composure. He sat down heavily, tears running into his beard.

Avenzoar sat forward. "What is wrong, what did I say?"

"I killed under the guise of healing," he sobbed, suddenly looking much older. "I was so intent on striking at King Henry that I destroyed my integrity as a physician to do it. Avenzoar, I spent four decades rebuilding my life after what he did. I became one of the greatest physicians in all Islam... then I visited him as a physician and defiled my healing hands to murder him. I was so obsessed by the chase that I ignored the outcome."

He stood slowly and shuffled across to the fountain, with Avenzoar following. The poet put a hand on his shoulder as he washed his face. "Accepting that you have done evil is a step toward atoning for it, my friend. Stay here for a while, rest and talk with Avenzoar, your friend and fellow physician."

"No, no. I am sincere in my remorse. You always say that about me, that I am too sincere for my own good. Have you not noticed that since I arrived I have never been able to meet your eyes for more than a moment? Whenever I meet a fellow physician I am shamed to remember that I have murdered, and I have to hang my head. Ah, but soon I shall go to where I shall meet no other physicians, to where I can shout the truth of how I murdered King Henry to the empty deserts of Africa. First I shall sign my worldly goods to you, then I shall travel along the salt road to the barren granite mountains of Aghadez and the marshy shores of Lake Tchad."

"You cannot be serious. The loss of your skills would be a crime in itself."

"My skills will not be lost to the sick in the great desert of Africa. Meantime, use my fortune to train needy students and to foster the arts of healing in whatever way you will – and should any woman come to you complaining of numbness within, or any man disrobe to reveal a ring of green fire about his penis, well, you now have the cure."

"But this is terrible. Your very words show you to be of good heart. Please stay."

Now the visitor held him by both arms and looked fleetingly into his eyes. "If I agreed to stay, you would probably despise me in the depths of your heart. Come now, let us find a scribe. I have much wealth to make over to you."

Later that afternoon, when his guest had departed, Avenzoar toured the partly completed Minaret with Ali al-Ghumari, his architect. As the sun's disc shimmered near the horizon they gazed out across the capital of al-Andalus.

"It is safe for now," said Avenzoar, "but one day a green fire may come to blight this fair city."

"Is it a weapon?" asked the architect with mild interest. "Is it like Greek fire?"

"It is English fire," replied Avenzoar.

"Hah! It must be fierce indeed to burn in spite of their rain," the architect laughed. "What is its fuel?"

Avenzoar fingered the scrap of folded parchment for reassurance. "Neglect and hatred," he said softly.

The architect pondered this for a moment, running his hand along the newly laid brickwork. "A cheap and plentiful fuel," he replied at last, and Avenzoar nodded.



Sean McMullen is one of Australia's most lauded newer sf writers, twice winner of the down-under Ditmar Award. His first novel, *Voices in the Light: Book One of Greatwinter*, has just been published by Aphelion Books (and we look forward to John Clute's review of it). His previous story for us was "Pacing the Nightmare" (issue 59).

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
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SCI-FI FREAKS BEAM INTO TOWN!

All sf conventions, no matter how worthy, learned or post-structuralist, can expect headlines like this from the discerning local press. In summer 1994 a British event (Wincon III in Winchester, whose past incarnations suffered more than most) hit back with a special and wildly popular Press membership rate of £30. Real people paid £25.

MINIONS OF THE MOON

Damien Broderick, dean-in-waiting of sf Down Under, bewailed his plight at an Aussie book launch: "I've been known for years as the second-most famous Australian sf writer, after George Turner; then he gets put out of action for a year with a stroke, and Greg Egan comes along!"

Algis Budrys was prevented by the US State Department from being an honoured guest at Wincon – see above. Despite his early application for a special US re-entry permit (required by non-nationals even after nearly 60 years' US residence), the authorities found themselves strangely unable to issue one until just too late. Protests went to the US Embassy, which may also have been punitively added to the Writers of the Future mailing list.

John Clute received the SF Research Association's 1994 Pilgrim Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Study of SF, in July: in an exclusive fax he said, "Whoeee, I think. I'm really extraordinarily pleased."

Dr Jack Cohen, in the interstices of one recent convention, gave an enthusiastic account of animal sperm collection techniques which was heard with riveted attention in a McDonald's full of people drinking thick milk-shakes.

Lionel Fanthorpe brags that he's been retained as consultant for the sf/fantasy events in the Swansea-based UK Year of Literature (throughout 1995, sf/fantasy bits in December). Expect plugs for the coming anthology of passages from his legendary Badger Books hackwork, now scheduled as *Out of the Badger Hole* (Portland, Oregon, 1995) with an introduction by the great man himself.

Graham Joyce's column for *Critical Wave* newsletter claims thrilling new British Fantasy Award edicts: "1: No voting for anyone who won last year. 2: No voting for any magazine which published any of your stories. 3: No voting for anything the committee doesn't want to see win, particularly anything coming out of the East Midlands." All

this "to avoid the kind of lack of controversy which dogged last year's awards"...

Charles Platt will guest-edit and design *Interzone* for April 1995, "which is significant for me in two ways: it will be 25 years after I terminated my full-time editorial and production work on *New Worlds*, and it's the month of my 50th birthday."

Steve Sneyd, sf poet, suffered a minor burglary this summer and had a fascinating insight into the status of writers in modern Britain when the investigating policeman said, very accusingly, "You were typing when I arrived." Steve: "Suddenly wondered if this had been made an offence in the new Criminal Justice Bill, or if it's just on the police list of activities that harbinger general badhattedness."

Norman Spinrad, speaking at Wincon, tactfully pictured sf as a black hole surrounded by this accretion disc of terrible things like "Trekkies, Scientologists and costume fans," all emitting life-destroying radiations as they orbit the central core....

Philip G. Williamson riposted devastatingly to an insensitive reviewer (oh all right, me) who asserted in *The Guardian* that his *Heart of Shadows* was standard fantasy fare: "I may well don the outer garments of generic fantasy but my underwear is full of surprises, and I feel you simply didn't bother to look." A noble phrase which surely deserves to sell a few copies.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Who? A writer whom glossy flyers describe as of "extraordinary breadth and variety," whose hot new bibliography "brings into new and sharply studied focus his extraordinary place in the literature of our time" for "students, teachers and scholars alike," while a volume-every-month "Classic Fiction Series" of 100+ reprints ("a master ... these timeless stories ...") is spewing forth, with introductions that breathlessly reveal just "what he was doing at the time he wrote the story"... Barely controlling my spasms, I record that the author is L. Ron Hubbard.

Hyperbollocks. The Fantasy & SF Book Club claims the 1993 *SF Encyclopedia* (which it offers at £30) is "almost as big as the universe itself!" ... containing in fact "OVER ONE MILLION PAGES."

Publishing Horrors. Bertlesmann AG, the German owners of Bantam Doubleday Dell in the USA, have raised a stink with a cost-cutting policy allegedly leading to the breaking of many written and verbal agreements. After being much messed around, Norman Spinrad (for it is he) came up with the kamikaze gambit of threatening to frighten off US distributors by warning that they could be legally involved should he sue BDD for publishing his new novel *Pictures at 11* in a way that violated the agreement. BDD capitulated.... Meanwhile, after a

Ansible LINK



recent sale to *Asimov's SF Magazine* – owned by BDD – Britain's own David Redd complained that the standard story contract now comes with a five-clause rider grabbing performance rights ("for which you shall receive a sum to be negotiated and agreed upon by us"); electronic rights; game, calendar, toy and T-shirt rights in all one's characters....

Evolution, the 1996 British Easter SF Convention, failed to reach a contractual agreement with its intended hotel – the Metropole in Brighton – and is combing the South-East for alternatives.

Bram Stoker Awards included ... NOVEL: *The Throat*, Peter Straub. COLLECTION: *Alone With the Horrors*, Ramsey Campbell. NON-FICTION: *Once Around the Bloch*, Robert Bloch's autobiography.

Victims of Ellison. This half-satirical "support group" for those feeling their lives blighted by the wrath of Harlan Ellison has now been laid to rest. Chief instigator (or victim) Charles Platt explains: "Moved (somewhat) by Mr Ellison's claims that the VoE support group took six months out of his working life and reduced his wife to tears (supposedly, she sat on the end of his bed sobbing 'Why won't they leave us alone?') I decided to suspend operations and returned the many cheques received from eager subscribers. I hadn't expected that my little exercise in self-defence would generate such traumatic repercussions."

15 Years Ago. Suddenly your columnist feels old and grey... remembering that at the World SF Convention in 1979 the sf community was totally unamazed by the first issue of a tacky little fan newsletter called *Ansible*, featuring the incautious claim that "future issues will contain news."

David Langford

YETI vs. THE BL

Since he started writing comics, initially for such publications as *Doctor Who Weekly* and *2000 A.D.*, Alan Moore has had awards heaped upon him, praise flung enthusiastically in his direction for almost everything he has ever done, and has been heralded as the "doyen of British comic writers" (*The Guardian*). Rival comics-writer Neil Gaiman claims to look on the "big hairy Yeti in a suit" with a "smidgen of awe." Moore first attracted worldwide media attention for his deconstructed postmodernist superhero series *Watchmen* (DC Comics), which, together with Frank Miller's graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns*, spawned a horde of deep-thinking superhero stories. Comics, it was claimed by many, had finally come of age. But, as I found out when I interviewed him at his Northampton home, Alan Moore sees things somewhat differently.

Ian Winterton: How did you get into writing comics, rather than, say, novels?

Alan Moore: Well, that's a fairly simple question that requires quite a complex answer. I think the reason that I got into comics was primarily because I was fascinated by them from a very early age. Comics were part of working-class culture, like rickets or whatever. It was just part of that culture at that time. The first comics that I read would've been the traditional British juvenile comics: the D. C. Thompsons, the *Beano*, the *Dandy*, *Beezer*, *Topper* and so on, which were fun; and, looking back on them, I realize just what a lot of brilliant work they had in those comics. At the time, however, it seemed somewhat prosaic, in that most of the subject matter revolved around naughty schoolboys and naughty schoolgirls, people getting caned, various modes of corporal punishment or huge, lumbering, xenophobic war heroes settling the Krauts or the Japs. Now, a lot of this stuff, particularly the school-boy stuff, yes it was funny, but I already went to school in a working-class area and this didn't provide any escape. When I was seven I came across the earliest *Flash* and the various comics of the 1960s: *Superman*, *Batman*. It was a revelation. This new exotic world with its four-colour printing, and New York with its skyscrapers, was very different to the Andrews Road area of Northampton that I grew up in. Just the very landscape was exotic and fascinating. That, on a purely seven-year-old kid level, is what got me involved in comics.

Now, as I got older and reached 13, 14, I became less aware of what the characters were doing and more aware of how they were drawn and written. I became aware

Alan Moore interviewed by Ian Winterton

that there were people actually creating these adventures, which is something that doesn't really occur to you at first. You never think about the writers and the artists who've written or drawn the stories. But, once I became aware of that, I began to notice differences in style, the range of different approaches, that these people brought to their work. I began to discover some of the finer comic story-tellers like Will Eisner who did *The Spirit* – that blew me away when I read it aged 13. It completely changed the way I thought about comics forever. There was also the Harvey Kurtzman stuff in the original *Mad Comics*, before it became the relatively pallid and sickly *Mad Magazine*. Harvey's stuff on those original *Mad Comics*, was pure genius. I don't think that the comic medium has ever equalled the level of work. So, Harvey was somebody else who gave me the idea of what sort of possibilities there were in comics. Now, given that sort of love for the medium, obviously there was a tendency for me to gravitate towards aspirations in that field, partly because it seemed to me to be a field which was underdeveloped. You know, cinema, which hasn't been around a lot longer than comics, has developed in leaps and bounds to achieve some real plateaus of artistic excellence. It's had *Battleship Potemkin*, *Citizen Kane*, all these classic works. Comics, other than Will Eisner, some of the EC stuff, Harvey Kurtzman, was still relatively in its infancy, which was exciting to me as there was more possibility there, more potential, more of a chance that I might actually make a difference to comics because I felt, despite the fact that comics was a 50-, 60-year-old medium, that I was still, to some degree, coming in on the ground floor, because comics was still in its infancy in a way that film wasn't even though they were about the same age. This was because comics had been stigmatized quite early on as being a juvenile medium. There was this sort of snobbishness that the only people who read comics were those that couldn't read prose without pictures...

Winterton: It still is.

Moore: Yeah. That's still the assumption, that comics are for subliterates; that flies in the face of the incredible degree of literacy that you need to read something like *Maus* or *Raw* or, on a lesser level, things like *Watchmen* or *Dark Knight*. You know, you do need to be quite literate to read these comics but the prejudice still exists and has existed throughout comics' existence, that they're somehow for people who move their lips when they read. That's the basic perception and that has, more or less, kept comics penned in the nursery. It's not given them the chance to grow out of it. It's also imposed superhero stories as the predominant genre, which is quite ridiculous. I mean, try imagining a world where most literature was devoted to the Western. I mean, that's how odd it is that comics should be largely devoted to superheroes and that has obviously kept comics back as much as anything else because even with postmodern, gritty, adult superheroes like *Watchmen* or *Dark Knight*, you're still talking about guys who're wearing their underwear over their trousers. You know, there's still that stigma.

I myself have come to the conclusion that, really, superheroes are not the place to tell deep, political, weighty stories, because they were never designed to carry that sort of weight. They're adventure characters for kids, and as such, that's fine. I've got nothing against them on that level but if comics are going to develop, they've got to develop into other areas outside that, and that's what continues to excite me. That's why I chose the comics medium over any other because I could see the possibilities there for different forms of story-telling. There are things that you can do in comics that you cannot do in any other medium. There are things that cannot be translated into film, that you could not do as a story. Comics have got an awful lot of advantages that not a lot of people have realized or exploited, and that was the incentive for me.

Winterton: I want to ask about your previous work, stuff you did for *2000 A.D.* like *Skizz* and *DR & Quinch*. How do you feel about it now?

Moore: Well, all of it I hope had a level of craft and all of it, I hope, was the best I could do on that particular day. Obviously, because it was earlier work I was less assured, less capable and, looking back on it, some of it I'm not so fond of. Also, my moral position, perhaps, has changed a bit, my perception of things has changed a bit and while *DR & Quinch* was very funny,

OODSUCKERS

there was something so lame about that humorous mayhem. It's been done so much before.

Winterton: I remember you saying on television that you thought *DR & Quinch* was like "Dennis the Menace with nukes."

Moore: It is, it is: "Dennis the Menace with nukes." And, actually, the idea of Dennis the Menace with nukes is not a terribly attractive one. It's like I got to the point where I was using nuclear weapons as a source of humour and you've got to wonder what all that's about really. What am I doing? What am I saying? I don't think that there was anything bad or immoral about the strips but it just seemed to me that that kind of "nuke 'em out" humour was a bit tiresome. *Skizz*, which was the first continuous strip I did for 2000 A.D., had some good points and some bad points but was largely sentimental tripe. This was because of the brief I was given; basically, without having seen *E.T.*, they wanted me to copy *E.T.* I got a directive from Steve MacManus saying, "There's this new film coming out about a kid who discovers an alien and we want you to do it. We want you to do a 2000 A.D. version." I said, "Well, if I'm gonna do it, I want it set in Britain, I want a realistic social background, a female lead character." But, even so, there was nothing very special about it. *Halo Jones*, on the other hand, was something that I'm very pleased with. I'd say that was my best stuff for 2000 A.D., no question. I mean, that third book was starting to get into material that was every bit as mature as the stuff I was doing in *Watchmen*. Also, a couple of the Future Shocks I

was pleased with for one reason or another – because of the story-telling, or because of the way the artist handled it or whatever. But, my feelings about my early work change from week to week. Sometimes I'll look at something and think, "This is awful," and for the next two years, in the back of my head I'll be thinking of it as really bad work. Then I'll pick it up, thumb it through and think, "This isn't so bad. It's better than I remember it." But I try not to think too much about my old work because it's not really that relevant to what I'm doing now. It's stuff that I'm still pleased with and, in many instances, actually proud of. Of course, there are some pieces that I'm totally embarrassed about but, on aggregate, I'm quite pleased with it.

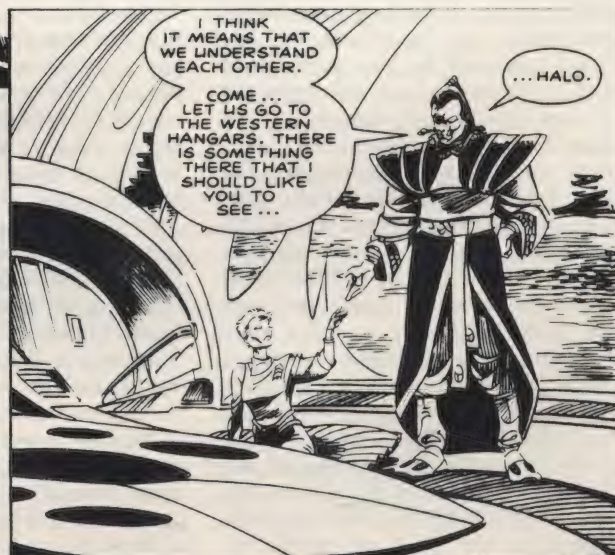
Winterton: Why did you leave DC Comics?

Moore: Because they're a bunch of blood-sucking bastards, quite frankly. It was because of a growing deception in which writers and artists were being used as cattle by the companies. It was something that I'd been aware of theoretically but it takes a while to actually feel it, to actually get a sense of what it means for all of those artists, all of those writers, who've been bled dry by the companies they've worked for. It's after you've met Jerry Siegel, the creator of *Superman*. He sold *Superman* to DC for \$34. It's after you've met some of these people and realized just how tragically they've been screwed. It's after I met, say, Joe Colhoun, the artist on *Charlie's War* which was the only British war-strip, that I felt had any integrity. It was for a comic called *Battle* and was written by Pat Mills

who is an excellent writer and it showed, for the first time in British comics, how the First World War really was. All the horror, the absurdity, the madness. It was not a heroic strip as such, but it was a very... poetic strip upon occasions. Anyway, Joe Colhoun, he was an old guy, he'd put everything he could into that strip, worked hard to get every detail right, the gas-masks, the horses, everything. And it came time for him to retire and he did. But then he found that, because he had never owned any of the copyright on any of his work, he hadn't got enough money to retire. So he went back to the drawing-board, and was dead within a couple of months. And younger people, too, you know, like Dan Day, frantically trying to get his work done for Marvel Comics on time because he'd been threatened by the editor in that way that editors do. Dan Day was actually sleeping at the Marvel offices, on the floor in the lobby. Staying up, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes – that was his diet – and working, you know, 20 hours a day. And, of course, his heart gave out and he died when he was 28. And these are not by any means unusual cases. There are an awful lot of casualties in the comics industry.

With DC Comics I think there was just a day when me and Dave Gibbons... We'd been doing *Watchmen* and we started getting quite a lot of money for it; "Wow," we thought, "they're giving us a four-percent royalty." Then you suddenly think, "Hang on: four percent each; that's eight percent and this leaves 92 percent that somebody else is getting. But we did all the work; we did all the adverts, etc. So why are these lists of credits in the back for people like the co-ordinator and controller? These people

The Ballad of Halo Jones, art by Ian Gibson, written by Alan Moore



didn't do anything, so why are they getting all our money?" This was exacerbated by DC trying to swindle us out of royalties on merchandizing we were putting out – the badges, the T-shirts and various other *Watchmen* paraphernalia. And we were saying, "No, come on now, you're taking the piss. You're already robbing us blind. Please don't try and grab this last couple of measly pennies from us, even if it is company policy to do that, please don't because we're gonna get really angry." And it went on. There were plenty of danger signs, if DC had been able to see them coming. The final straw came when DC actually brought in a ratings system on the front of their comics without consulting any of their creative personnel. They were bowing down to pressure from various fundamentalist Christian groups to put a ratings system on the front of their comics, similar to those used on films. Me, Frank Miller, Howard Chaykin and a couple of others, we just thought this was completely abhorrent, mainly because we thought that they shouldn't be caving in to fundamentalist Christian groups, of which there were a lot in America at that time. We also thought that it was abhorrent that they should do it without consulting us. You know, we made it clear to them that we did not want this system and that if they pressed ahead with it they would have to face the consequences. And, being DC, they pressed ahead with it, and I left. That wasn't the only reason, but it was the final straw. I had the growing feeling that cartoonists should take things into their own hands more. I mean, they're the ones who do all the work and so they should be the ones who're reaping the benefits from it, not a bunch of faceless middlemen in suits who do very little. That was why I left DC.

I was already completely alienated from Marvel Comics after the way in which they used their size to... well, it's the way Marvel always do it. They're Marvel, they've got loads of lawyers and they can keep you in court forever. They don't have to be right. In the instance of the character Marvelman, which was established copyright in this country in 1954, whereas Marvel Comics was copyrighted in the US in 1961 – as far as I can see, unless America has some different calendar from us, Marvelman came before Marvel Comics. But Marvel said, "No, you can't use that name, because we're Marvel comics and we've got loads of lawyers and we'll keep you in court forever." So we changed it to Miracleman and I said, "Look, all right, you bullied us into doing this, fair enough. But I will never work for you. Ever. And you can't reprint any of the stories I did for Marvel UK because I own the copyright to them," which has pretty much divorced me from the American comics industry, which I'm quite happy about. It's a nasty world, comics, possibly because when you go in the door you expect it to be a place full of cheeriness and laughter. You've read all the Stan Lee ball-pen pages, haven't you? You think that they're all one big happy family, that they sit around the ball-pen together with "Smiling" Stan trading his stories with "Jolly" Jack and "Sturdy"

Steve. But you don't realize that the reality of it was that "Jolly" Jack and "Sturdy" Steve were getting screwed by "Smiling" Stan and that they ended up not owning any of the work that they'd done. Stan Lee ended up relaxing by a pool somewhere in California. Steve Ditko, during Spiderman's 30th anniversary, the character that he'd created, Steve Ditko was penniless and hadn't got a home. While all the celebrating was going on, Steve was living at the YMCA. I mean, this is just not right. These were the giants of the industry Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko. Without these guys, Marvel wouldn't even have existed. Me and Frank started to think, "Well, we're really popular now and DC are bending over backwards for us." But we got a strong impression that if we started to get any less valuable to DC at any time then, if the comics industry had treated giants like Steve Ditko, Jack Kirby, Jerry Siegel, badly, then would they do the same to us? Would they treat us any better? The answer was: no, they're not. So we got out.

That was the main story behind it. It was a matter of necessity. You work in the industry longer and longer with your injustice mounting and eventually you have to make a move or you have to decide you're going to swallow it and, when it came to it, I couldn't. The ones that I work with now are creator-publishers, where creators are given a fair shake: Tundra, Kitchen Sink, Image. People like that.

Winterton: So, now that you've left the big companies, how do you feel about other people writing characters that you created, such as Skizz or John Constantine?

Moore: In the case of Skizz, because I wasn't very happy with the strip anyway, when Jim Baike phoned up and asked if I minded I told him that I had no interest in it at all. I haven't actually seen what Jim did with it.

Winterton: I wasn't that impressed, I'm afraid. The artwork was good, as Baike's usually is, but, to me, the story seemed to be lacking something.

Moore: Well, I don't know. With the Constantine character... I regret that DC owns the character. It's not my character really. This new John Constantine is not like the one I created because, really, Constantine in his own book is a bad idea, as I tried to explain to Karen Berger at the time. In *Swamp Thing*, as a supporting character, it was easy to preserve the enigma, the mystery. The appeal of Constantine is that you don't really know who he is, he's very cool and you're given very few glimpses inside his head, you know, and even what you are allowed to see only creates further mystery around the character. You don't know how he appears or where he vanishes to and you don't know how he does all these things. If you put him centre stage in his own book, as they did in *Hellblazer*, inevitably you're going to have to reveal more and more and more until he becomes prosaic. I mean, Garth Ennis is a very good writer. I like his dialogue a lot, it's very fresh and exciting. I

think that *Troubled Souls* and, particularly, *True Faith*, were really exciting pieces of work. The thing with Garth is that he's a young bloke, about 22, 23 – which is to his credit, the fact that he's doing stuff that good when he's so young – but it's also true that Garth spends a lot of his time is down the pub drinking Guinness. That's what he likes doing, because he's young and that's where he's at and that's understandable. But, because that's Garth's world, it also becomes the world of most of his characters too. There's an awful lot of sitting down in the pub drinking Guinness in his stories. I believe that he even had Judge Dredd drinking a pint of the stuff!

Winterton: No, Dredd was in the pub, berating his Irish counterpart for drinking the Guinness.

Moore: Somehow that motif manages to creep in there.

Winterton: I like some of Garth's writing, but I must say that I'm not impressed with his work on Dredd. Like some of the other younger writers, he seems to be writing a caricature of the character, rather than actually capturing Dredd's true essence.

Moore: John Wagner had a very strong sense of what was Dredd and what wasn't, and I admire him for that. He knew that it was a very fine line. You give a certain amount of seriousness to Dredd, but not too much, and you make him absurd to a certain degree, but not too much. It's just a matter of keeping the balance.

Winterton: When Wagner writes it, it's still good. But with the others, they've had things... like, well, John Major in various guises about three times.

Moore: Political satire, eh? John Wagner was never heavy-handed with it; he'd do great with it. But I imagine he's heartily sick of Dredd by now. He's been doing it for so long and, of course, he doesn't own the character.

Winterton: DC have been given the rights to produce Dredd strips now.

Moore: DC doing Dredd? Oh dear, oh dear...

After going totally independent in 1988, Alan Moore set up his own publishing company in order to produce his magnum opus, *Big Numbers*, an excellently crafted tale of everyday life in a fictionalized Northampton. Unfortunately, due to difficulties with artists, only two issues ever made it to the bookshelves and Moore's company went under. While trying to find an artist to work on *Big Numbers*, Moore has written several smaller works, most notably *From Hell* with Eddie Campbell and *A Small Killing* with Oscar Zarate. He is currently working on a new graphic novel for Victor Gollancz Ltd, provisionally entitled *Call of the Fire*. Alan Moore continues to live in Northampton and has just had an amazing bathroom fitted.

SOCIALLY UNREWARDING

Chris Gilmore

Office of the Manager
Clombury Crematorium
Parks, Amenities & Leisure Dept.
Town Hall, Clombury

Aunt Clara von Präps
Prime Time Life Magazine
Winnie Mandela House
Friendship Piazza, London

Dear Aunt Clara:

As my problem stems directly from my work, I suppose I should start by telling you a bit about it. I was warned at the interview that I'd find it socially unrewarding; I would suffer all the disadvantages of an undertaker, without the cachet that rightly belongs to the members of that skilled profession. Nor would I enjoy the society of the workplace. I must work alone, to save costs. If I reported sick, a relief would be sent, and a certificate sought; my annual and statutory holidays were going to cause trouble enough.

I accepted these deterrents with an air of appropriate stoicism, but inwardly I rejoiced. The more unattractive it was made to sound, the fewer people would want it, so the less competition there should be. Jobs were scarce in Clombury that year, and I was one of many who had lost out when Bushey went down the tubes. Drivers, clerks, machine

operators, supervisors – some quite well educated, but all redundant at a stroke, and all basically unskilled. At the time all I said was that I had a good health record (which Bushey's receivers could confirm), and wasn't the sort who takes to his bed at the first sign of a cold. I could have added that the people I was to work with were supremely unlikely to catch anything from me, but I didn't think of it at the time, which is probably just as well. It's a mischancy business introducing gallows humour into a job interview, even for crematorium boilerman.

It's a paradoxical job in many ways. In their dark suits and white shirts both sexes come here, often in quite large numbers, for the sake of the work I do, but they don't want to meet me. Their world is in the bland, non-denominational chapel, with its indirect lighting, blond wood, grey carpet and discreet matching curtain – grey, with a faint tremor of blue; suggesting woodsmoke, perhaps? My world, with its concrete floor, harsh fluorescent strips and two tatty chairs that were once part of someone's three-piece suite, lies beyond that curtain. There, in my blue boiler suit (what else?) I eat my sandwiches, drink rather more beer and coffee than is good for me (but one counteracts the effect of the other, or so I maintain), make appropriately frequent use of my private lavatory, read my magazines and receive far more of the dead than the living.

The coffins always present a slightly surprised air as, to recorded kitsch organ music, they glide into this rough and ready environment; it's as if they feel the conveyor has somehow taken a wrong turning. Perhaps they come expecting the embrace of the cleansing flame. Not quite – or not quite at once.

It makes perfect sense, when you think about it. My hours are from 9.30 to 5.30, but the very earliest services begin at 10.15, and the very last will be over by 4.45, and usually earlier than that. After all, people have often had to come a long way at short notice. So how does the boilerman justify his existence at the front and rear ends? Why, you must understand that average burning time is rather longer than average service time, and there's no second boiler; idle capacity is condemned by all economists. So in the morning I light up and burn off my backlog, and in the evening I make sure next morning's backlog won't be unreasonably large.

We'll all burn together when we burn,

You won't have to stand in line to wait your turn,

sang Tom Lehrer, but he had in mind a rather greater conflagration than Clombury Borough Council could be expected to finance. I don't make the coffins stand in line, though sometimes I stack them on trolleys; and if some of them go through the doors adorned with a ring or two from my coffee mug, I've yet to hear a complaint.

Watching the congregations spill out I've seen some very richly dressed women in my time, and some who were very distressed. I've also noticed that the two groups tend not to overlap, so I was more than a little shocked when I opened my discreet door to Alice's tap just after 5.00 on a Friday. It's marked PRIVATE, but I don't keep it locked when I'm working, and I thought it was Jenny come a little earlier than usual.

Jenny's my only regular caller, and her visits combine business with pleasure. She's some sort of super Green, and has a theory that the world is about to run short of mercury. This means the amount that goes up my chimney (not to mention the silver) represents a criminal waste of resources. Therefore, she asked, the first time she came round, couldn't I wrench the more heavily filled molars out of the corpses and save them for her? She would keep them, and sell them when the price went through the roof. We could split the money, and both be rich! I was rather disgusted at this idea, which put me in mind of Auschwitz, and told her I wasn't a dentist. The idea of fossicking about in dead folk's mouths has very limited appeal for most people, which I also told her, and thought I'd got rid of her for good.

No way. She was back the next evening with two sizes of rubber gloves, two pairs of pliers and a plastic bag. Heigh ho. I've always found it hard to say no to a presentable woman, and after all, cremation coffins are very easy to open. Before I quite knew it I'd taken to saving some of the most mercury-infested heads for backlog time. One thing led to another, and before long I ditched my two old armchairs in favour of a convertible divan.

So Alice's appearance was unwelcome as well as surprising. Instead of plump, fair Jenny in her C&A dress and cardy there was a painfully lean and distinctly swarthy woman. Her hair was very dark brown, showing the earliest streaks of grey, and she was sporting a generously cut suede skirt, cream silk tunic, mink stole and sheer silk stockings.

These she had teamed with calf-length crocodile boots, matching handbag and an expression of desperate misery.

"Yes?" I said, blinking at her stupidly, "can I help you?"

I was expecting trouble, but I couldn't have said what kind. If I'd had to guess I'd have put her down as someone's distraught mistress, excluded from the service because the widow would be there, now come to beg for a last illicit glimpse of someone's face before he went in. Against the rules, of course, but harmless; yet something told me there was nothing harmless about this lady.

"You can, sir," she said, formally but urgently, with a slight forward gesture of her right hand. As if in a dream I found I had stood aside for her and shut the door. I was expecting her to sit on the divan, but she turned away from it to stand with one arm draped across the top coffin on the stack. "Sir," she said, fixing me with eyes that seemed to be all pupil, "I am desperate. My livelihood is gone. I see death staring in my face. But, sir, you can help me! Please say you will! I will be forever grateful!"

"I'm sorry," I said, "But you seem to have come to the wrong place. If you need money – " I'm sure I sounded disbelieving at this point. Whatever else she might need it wasn't that.

"You mean brass pounds?" she interrupted me. "Like these?"

So saying she snapped open her bag and pulled out a generous handful of Maggies which she dropped on the coffin. Three or four of them rolled off, and because she didn't try to follow them with her eyes I didn't either.

"Well, yes," I said, more bemused than ever. "Isn't that what most people want?"

"People!" she exclaimed. "What have I to do with people? Sir, I have suffered catastrophe. My ground has failed. All week have I won not so much as a fledgling sparrow. Last week I took from the gutter two urchins crushed by the wheels of machine cars. I cannot live on that!"

"But you don't have to!" I said, gesturing towards the cash. "That would keep you going for a month."

"I can buy nothing with it. My compact binds me to my ground. There must I live, and there must I find my sustenance. And it has failed!" With that she opened the handbag again, pulled out a crumpled silk hanky, and began to sob quietly. An equally crumpled £20 note fluttered unregarded to the floor.

I can't bear sobbing women – well I can, I see plenty of demonstrative mourners, but they don't want me to do anything. This one obviously did. I put a hand on her shoulder. "I'll do anything I can," I promised recklessly, "But please tell me what your trouble is!"

She snapped erect at once. "You will? You promise? Great will be your reward!"

I staggered back. I was closer to her than I had come before, and for the first time got a load of her breath. Hers was no common halitosis or crapula, nor even abscessed teeth. It was like the stench of clay from the depths of a stagnant pond, multiplied a thousandfold, and it was cold.

She could hardly not notice my reaction. "The price I must pay," she said quietly, "Or part of it. But hark! Your paramour approaches!"

With that she scooped the coins off the coffin, turned like an eel and dived through the curtains into the darkened

chapel. At the same moment I heard Jenny's tap on the door.

That evening's session with Jenny was somewhat fraught. I managed to rescue the £20 before she noticed it, but my mind was even less on amalgam-filled teeth than usual. What was the strange woman's problem? How did she know Jenny was my "paramour," and what else did she know about us? Later I wondered what she was making of the noises from the couch. Not that she had any right to comment, nor did I expect her to; but the thought of performing before an audience displeased me.

It seemed an age before I could stick my head through the curtains and call softly, "You can come out now." I was only half expecting her to reappear, but it was no illusion that slid rapidly down the conveyor.

"You will help me? You promise?" she asked urgently, before her feet were even on the floor.

"If I can," I said cautiously, "but what do you need?"

"What only you can give!"

Gradually it came out. Alice had been a witch, she told me, in the 17th century, and a very successful one. She had eluded the witchfinders of King James, and Cromwell's also, winning through to practise her art almost unhindered in the more congenial times of good King Charles and the Georges. But no witch may remain a witch forever. Those who touch magic are touched by it, and must sooner or later join the ranks of the ab-human. Some become vampires, some werewolves, harpies, goblins, kelpies, sirens, silkies or ogres; or like herself, ghouls.

Every ab-human has its limitations. A werewolf cannot resist the Moon, a vampire cannot face the Sun; a siren is bound to one rock, a ghoul is bound to one burying-place. Alice had thought she was on a winner when the change came on her, and she found herself bound to the newly opened Clombury municipal cemetery. It served a large and thriving community, and was generously laid out. She calculated that there would be interments sufficient to serve her forever. The new fashion for cremation had alarmed her at first, but by the time it became established the population had risen so that she could fare well enough on the minority who still went underground.

But she hadn't reckoned on the growing squeamishness of the 20th century, nor could she have done much about it if she had. "Time was," she told me, "when few memorials told truth above 50 years. Then that which had served the worms and me went to the charnel house, and the ground welcomed a new tenant. But now ... none has been laid to rest for months now, nor will be, for they say the ground is full, and therefore I must starve. But you have charge of flesh a-plenty. I' the name of Charity, give me to eat!"

Who could resist such a plea? I nodded dumbly, and gestured toward the coffins, already open from Jenny's rooting after mercury. Again, I'm not sure what I expected – that Alice would cut herself a joint, wrap it in a section of shroud, and depart for whatever vault she made her home, like a smart housewife returning from the butcher's. Far from it. She darted in, snapped off a forearm, and started to gnaw before I could draw breath. I barely got to the loo in time, where I spent a most uncomfortable ten minutes. Whenever I thought my stomach could yield no more there would come

a crunching and a gulping, and I'd have another attack of the dry heaves. After a last, painful retch I called Alice to let me know when she was sated. Then I knelt down over the pan, my fingers in my ears, and tried not to imagine what must be going on.

At last a hard, sharp finger tapped my shoulder. "Kind sir, I thank you from my bottom-most heart," she said simply. "Come forth! How may I reward you?"

I emerged on shaky feet, pleased to see the lid was back on the coffin. The only reward with any attraction at that point would have been a promise never to come near the place again, but I knew that was one item permanently off the menu. "I can't think," I muttered, glancing at the coffin. I wondered how much lighter it was, and felt my gorge rise again. Alice seemed no plumper, but her manner was easier. She even raised her hanky to her lips as she belched delicately.

"But you must take something!" she cried, snapping open her bag again. "These brass and paper pounds, are they not what you desire?" And she poured her heap of currency back on the coffin.

"Y-yes," I had to acknowledge, "I can use them ... but if you're bound to the cemetery, how do you come by them?"

She shrugged. "There's a nest of vampires nearby. Who ever heard of a poor vampire? I perform small tasks for them when the Sun is up, and they pay me."

"What sort of tasks?" I asked. I feared some further horror, but better to learn at once than speculate through the night.

"I place orders for their clothes and jewels, I take their linen to and from the waterless launderers, I purchase galvanic batteries for their wireless sound receivers. They, for their part, give me whatever of these pounds I require for my own needs."

I pictured a Count Dracula scaling a gaunt castle wall, his opera cloak newly sponged and pressed courtesy of University Tailors, both hands free thanks to his Walkman. It was too much; I doubled up on the divan. God knows what any passerby must have thought, as peals of hysterical laughter from the crematorium tore into the evening air.

"You make merry, sir?" Alice asked with some asperity. I realized she must have thought I was laughing at her for running errands more proper to a servant girl, and it hurt her feelings. I made haste to reassure her, by praising her taste in clothes.

Ghoul and witch she may be, but Alice is still a woman. She positively preened. "Now you may buy as good for your leman," she said patronizingly, and I realized that if she was in my power for her sustenance, I was nonetheless in hers. Such is the force even of brass and paper pounds, when you have plenty of them.

I decided to tell Jenny the truth, or something not too different, straight away. It unsettles a woman if you suddenly seem to be in funds but make a mystery of where they come from, so I told her that a doctor, a great professor of anatomy, had made me an offer for the right to forage around in the coffins. At first she was all for it – anything that smacks of recycling is fine by Jenny, and never mind if it smacks equally of Burke and Hare – but unfortunately I let slip that this was a female doctor, and quite young-looking.

She instantly became jealous, and demanded to meet her.

I swore that she was most certainly not my type, and with heroic halitosis to boot, but I was not believed. Jenny said that any young doctor must know all about macrobiotic dieting, and her breath would be pure. What could I do? I could hardly explain the character and extent of Alice's carnivorism, yet I'd certainly know no peace till I set the meeting up.

I explained my problem to Alice, who seemed happy enough to go along with the masquerade, but I was far from certain that Jenny would be fooled. First, Alice's conception of "physik" was a farrago of herbs, humours and horoscopes; secondly, her vocabulary must already have been quite archaic when she metamorphosed from witch to ghoul. What modern professor of anatomy would refer to herself as a *chirurgéon*?

The three of us met at the crematorium on a Saturday morning. I chose it because I knew I would be busy, and hoped that would help keep things short, but it didn't work out like that. Alice took command at once with, "Master Nicholas, I must be above £500 in your debt. May I carry Mistress Jennifer through some dress-shops, and expend somewhat on your behalf?"

Show me the man who would dare object to that! Jenny drove back towards the end of the afternoon with three or four flat packages which I took to represent at least £500, and in a very happy mood. "You are gullible, Nick," she greeted me. "Alice is never a surgeon!"

"Really?" I asked, as casually as I could. "What is she, then?"

"She's a witch – it's obvious! And guess what, she's going to teach me how to be one too!"

So, Aunt Clara, there you have my problem. I realize it's my own fault really – it all comes of being too indulgent to women. But now that the time has really come to put my foot down, do you think I should tell Jenny what witchcraft entails in the long run, and that there'll be no more fancy clothes unless she gives it up, or should I tell Alice there'll be no more meat unless I get lessons too?

Chris Gilmore is known as an astringent book reviewer (see his columns in this magazine over the past couple of years). The above is his first story for us, though he has published a few pieces of fiction in small-press magazines and says that he is “currently attempting to place a hard-sf-trilogy based partly on imagination, partly on experience, and partly on a very dubious extension of quantum theory.” He lives in Bedford, and has worked for some years as a freelance copy-editor and non-fiction writer.

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A Friend INDEED

David Garnett

As William walked towards the bar, he glanced briefly and disapprovingly around. It wasn't the kind of pub he'd have entered unless he had to.

There were about a dozen customers inside, all men. The only woman was behind the bar. She finished pulling a pint of beer, took the money, then looked at William.

"Gin and tonic, please," he said.

"Ice and lemon?"

"Please."

He'd arranged to meet Helen from work, but after waiting outside her office block for quarter of an hour, he had gone into reception and asked the girl to call her. Helen had apologized, explaining that she was in a meeting. She said she'd be through in a few minutes and would meet him in the pub on the opposite corner.

If it had really only been a matter of a few minutes, William would have preferred to remain where he was; but he knew from his own experience that meetings always tended to last longer than expected.

He paid for his drink and carried it to a table in the corner furthest from the bar, then opened his briefcase and took out his *Daily Telegraph*. He'd been so busy today that he hadn't even had time to start the crossword.

Someone walked across to the cigarette machine next to him. Automatically, William glanced back – and found himself gazing up into the face of Eddie Brown.

He stared in amazement, unable to believe what he saw.

Years had passed, but there was no doubt that it was Eddie: the one person in the whole world he'd hoped never to see again.

His mind was suddenly flooded with the forgotten horrors of his childhood, and he remembered the absolute unfairness of it all.

Now here he was – the person responsible.

William was stunned, unable to look away.

As Eddie fed coins into the machine, he noticed he was being watched. He turned his head, then his eyes widened with recognition.

"Willy!" he said. "Willy Barber!"

William shook his head in denial. He bent down, trying to hide behind his newspaper. But Eddie plucked the newspaper from his hands and leaned forward, grinning.

William didn't look at him. "You've made some mistake," he muttered.

"You can't fool me, Willy. It's me – Eddie Brown!" He put his beer glass down on William's table and unwrapped his cigarette packet.

"No," said William, shaking his head again. "No, you're wrong."

"Fancy meeting up with you again, Willy. I often think of you, you know, and all the good times we used to have." Eddie lit a cigarette, then tucked the pack in his shirt pocket.

What was he talking about? What good times? They'd all been bad, so far as William was concerned. But it was no use pretending, he realized, and he looked up.

"How are you, Eddie?" he managed to say. "What are you doing in London?"

More than a decade had elapsed. William had moved over 200 miles from his home town, but Eddie had still found him.

"I've been living down here a couple of years. Everyone seems to end up in London sooner or later." His eyes took in William's expensive suit. "You're looking well."

"Thanks."

William could hardly say the same about Eddie: he was wearing faded and patched jeans, scuffed shoes, an old shirt. His hair was long and tangled, his face covered in a week's stubble. A grown up version of the way he used to be.

"We've got lots to talk about," Eddie said.

"No," said William, standing up quickly. "I must be going. I'm meeting someone."

He was surprised to find that he was as tall as Eddie, whereas at school he'd always been much smaller.

But everything was different now, he told himself. He could handle Eddie Brown these days. He was an adult; he'd long outgrown his childish fears. He couldn't be intimidated any more.

Then why was he so nervous..?

Eddie sat down. "You've time for a drink with me, Willy," he said.

The years rolled back, and William said: "Yes."

"I'll have a pint of best," Eddie told him.

William walked slowly to the bar, not glancing back at the spectre which had returned to haunt him.

He thought of leaving immediately, of heading straight for the door, but he'd forgotten his briefcase. All he could do was buy the drinks then carry them back to the table.

"It's been a long time," said Eddie.

"Twelve years," William told him. He knew exactly how long it was since his torture had ended, since he'd been allowed to live a life of his own.

"I suppose it must be. I left school, but you stayed on. Then university, I suppose? A good job. A good home. A good wife. Yes?"

Almost, thought William. He didn't have a wife, not yet. That would soon change. He'd known Helen for over a year, and soon they'd become officially engaged.

"Something like that," he said. "What about you?"

He was feeling calmer now, and he watched Eddie without really listening to what he was saying, wondering how he could have spent so much of his life in fear of this man. No – not a man, because they'd only been boys at the time.

It had started when they were both five, going to the same school. Eleven years later, another school, and he was still Eddie's perpetual victim. By then, it was no longer William's toys that he took or broke; Eddie's cruelty had become more subtle but even more damaging.

Looking back, William was only too aware of how Eddie had stolen or ruined everything that he'd ever wanted or cared about. At the time, however, it hadn't seemed to matter. He'd thought that Eddie really was his friend. Friends shared things, didn't they? Eddie played jokes, but it was just harmless fun.

Only later, when Eddie wasn't there, would William realize what had happened – what new torment and indignity had been inflicted on him: how Eddie had got him into trouble, or made the whole class laugh at him, or forced him to do something he didn't want to.

For a long time William used to dream about Eddie Brown, and he'd wake up in panic. Only then would he realize that he'd left school long ago, that the years of embarrassment and humiliation were over.

Now Eddie was back.

He'd obviously fallen on hard times, and William felt pleased. Justice had triumphed at last. He was a success, while his old enemy was an absolute nobody.

Originally they'd lived in the same area, which meant that William wasn't safe from Eddie even when he came home. When he was eleven, his family had moved and he believed that his ordeal was over. But on his first day at secondary school, to his absolute horror, he'd heard that feared voice shouting out: "Willy..!"

He hated the name. It was Eddie who started calling him that, and the name had caught on – even with the teachers.

It was just bad luck that they'd run into each other again. He'd be polite to Eddie, finish his drink, then go and wait for Helen outside her office.

He tried to analyse why he'd been so intimidated by Eddie

all those years ago, but after so much time it didn't make sense. Maybe it never had. It wasn't as though Eddie had been the school bully; William was his only target.

William had skipped school many days, preferring to wander the streets rather than endure Eddie's continual harassment and victimization.

He closed his eyes, trying to shut out the awful memories. That was all they were: memories. Eddie had become a pathetic specimen, rambling on about the past simply because he had no future. William was glad he'd met him, because finally he could rid him from his mind. The tyrant had become a victim.

"Hello, Bill. Sorry I'm late."

He glanced up in surprise.

"Helen!" He smiled at her and rose to his feet. "Goodbye, Eddie. We've got to be going."

Helen was watching Eddie, obviously wondering why William should be sitting with someone who was halfway to being a tramp.

"Ah, so you're Helen," said Eddie. "I've heard all about you – although not how attractive you were. Why don't you sit down?"

As soon as he'd seen Helen, Eddie had begun to lie: he was always good at that. And at flattery.

"We have to go," said William.

"There's no rush, is there?" Helen said. "Get me a drink, Bill. I'm dying of thirst." She took a seat and smiled tentatively at Eddie, who sat opposite her.

William remained standing. "No," he said, "time's getting on. We ought to go."

"Buy the lady a drink," said Eddie, and he pushed his empty glass forward. "I'll have the same again."

William stared at him, then glanced at Helen.

"Cider?" he asked.

She nodded, and he went to the bar. He bought half a pint of dry cider and a beer for Eddie. When he returned, the other two were talking. Helen was smoking, even though she knew William didn't like it. Eddie had given her a cigarette.

"I was just telling Helen how we grew up together," said Eddie, "that we were best friends for years and years."

"And you met here by chance?" Helen said. "That's amazing, isn't it?"

"Yes," agreed William, without much enthusiasm. "Amazing."

"Bill's always been very reticent about his past," said Helen.

"Listen, Helen," said Eddie, lowering his voice and pretending that William couldn't hear, "if there's anything you want to know about Willy, just ask me."

Helen smiled. "Willy?" she said.

And William felt his guts twist.

He'd always made sure he was known as William, but he let his friends call him Bill. That was a strong, tough, no nonsense name. Not that he'd ever had many friends, male or female, to call him Bill.

His miserable existence had ended when Eddie left school, but it wasn't until Helen came along that William had known the true meaning of living. It had taken more than ten years for him to recover, to gain any confidence in himself. The 14 months with Helen had been the best he had ever known, without a doubt.

But his nightmare had returned. The worst thing in his life had now met the best that had ever happened to him.

"Willy," Eddie said. "Or Little Willy."

William cringed. His intestines knotted even tighter.

"Little Willy," repeated Helen, and she giggled. "I can vouch for that."

William could hardly believe what he was hearing. Helen had only met Eddie a couple of minutes ago, and already she was making reference to sex. Although she and William had been to bed together a few times, they certainly didn't talk about what went on there.

Eddie laughed uproariously, far more than the comment was worth, and took a gulp of his beer. Helen imitated his action, downing half her cider in a single swallow.

"We'd do anything for each other, you know," said Eddie. "I remember once I had to catch a bus for a swimming competition after school, but I didn't have the fare. Willy lent me the money. It was only later I found out that he'd given me all he had on him, and he had to walk home."

That wasn't the way William remembered it. Eddie had forced him to hand over the bus fare. Somehow it had seemed the right thing to do at that moment; he'd wanted to help Eddie. Only later had he realized what had happened, that Eddie had manipulated him again.

"I admit it, Helen," Eddie continued, "I'm not the brightest of guys, not when it comes to academic subjects. My talents lie elsewhere. If it wasn't for Willy, I'd never have been able to keep up at school. He used to let me copy his homework. In exams, he'd pass me the answers."

Eddie didn't reveal how many times they'd been caught – and that it was always William who was accused of cheating. He'd even been blamed for copying Eddie's homework on several occasions, and he never understood why the teachers didn't realize the truth. Eddie wasn't very clever, but he had animal cunning, and he got away with it. Again and again.

As Eddie talked, Helen was captivated by every word, nodding her agreement and smiling. William wondered what she could see in him.

He was her exact opposite, everything she resented and avoided: crude, loud, dirty, badly dressed.

Eddie had always got on very well with girls. They found him fascinating, and he'd had numerous girlfriends at school – all of whom had delighted in the way Eddie picked on and teased William.

...Little Willy.

William forced himself to stay calm. It would all be over in a few minutes. They'd leave soon, and Eddie would be gone from their lives forever.

When Helen drained her glass, she asked for another. William looked at Eddie. It was time that he bought a round, but all he did was slide his glass across the table towards William.

William went to the bar again, and this time he also bought himself a drink.

Helen and Eddie were laughing together when he returned, and he had no doubt that they were laughing at him. They were sitting next to each other by now, and it was as though they'd known each other for years, that William was the outsider.

They spoke about him as if he wasn't there. Even Helen

referred to him as Willy. She finally noticed William glaring at her, and she stubbed out her cigarette.

"I think we'd better be leaving," she said. "I'll just be a minute." She picked up her bag and made her way to the door marked *Ladies*.

Eddie watched her walk away.

"You're a lucky man, Willy," he said. "But then you always were."

William looked at him in astonishment.

"You've got everything, haven't you?" Eddie added.

William realized that he was right – because for him Helen was everything, all he'd ever wanted. She was good looking, witty, intelligent. What more could any man ask?

"And I've got nothing," Eddie said, and he gazed into his beer glass, not wanting to meet William's eyes. "I don't suppose you could lend me a few quid?"

William slipped his hand into his jacket for his wallet. Whatever he gave Eddie, it was worth it to get rid of him.

"Thanks," said Eddie. He reached over, took the wallet, and put it in his pocket.

They sat in silence, not knowing what to say to each other, until Helen returned.

"Another drink?" Eddie suggested.

Helen shook her head. "No, we must be going," she said. "It was nice meeting you."

"Goodbye," said William.

"Goodbye," said Eddie, then he stood up and went out with Helen.

Watching them leave, William thought what a coincidence it was meeting up with his old friend after so long. He really envied Eddie. Everything always worked out well for him, the lucky sod. What had he done to deserve such a terrific girl as Helen?

William finished his drink and looked around the pub, wondering what had made him come here tonight. There was something in the back of his mind, but it slipped away. He'd remember later, he supposed, if it was important.

He walked towards the bar, counting out the change from his pocket. He might as well have another drink while he was here. There was nothing else to do.

For Lisa Tuttle

David Garnett is the editor of *New Worlds* 4 (Gollancz, November 1994) and the author of *Stargonauts* (Orbit, November 1994). The latter book represents his return to sf novel-writing after a 20-year hiatus. In the interim he has written numerous short stories ("Off the Track," in *IZ* 63, was his last for us) and pseudonymous novels (e.g. a Warhammer fantasy trilogy as by "David Ferring") as well as editing several anthology-series, of which *New Worlds* is the best known. Originally from Liverpool, he has lived for many years in Ferring, West Sussex.





ick a finger, taste the wind: what, at the midpoint of the decade, are the major fantasy film genres of the 1990s? More casualties than survivors, is the first impression. Space movies are way, way out, as is pretty much anything with the word "futuristic" in its logline. Splatter is coughing up blood; terminator movies, generously defined, are still in modest renaissance, but only so long as the budgets are unfeasibly colossal and one of the two permitted leads has a diary window; while even the extended family of history-twister genres that seemed so viable a couple of years ago are beginning to fade, except in those privileged cases where a bunch of megasaurians can be worked in. And that leaves virtually the only zones of indisputable boom as the interlocked milieux of comics and cartoons – from Disney's annual pass to the boxoffice stratosphere in the west to the yellow tide of *animé* in the east, and a swelling roll of live-action transfers from panel and cel in between. It's not easy to see why these graphics-based genres should be so privileged, or even what they really have in common, unless it's just that they happen to be peculiarly well placed to profit from the digital revolution in visual effects technology. But it must be symptomatic that such a remarkably indifferent movie as *The Mask* can morph itself into a money farm out of all proportion to its modest actual merits.

The Mask sets up its stall at the intersection of two of the more adventurous high-

ways from ink into light. One of the merging lanes is the toon-bites-man genre of *Roger Rabbit* and *Cool World*, whose heroes are abducted to an otherworld of elasticated Tex Avery slapstick where all the bruises of flesh and psyche are annealed in a rubbery catharsis of painless mayhem; while the other, unashamedly inspired by emulation of Burton's *Batmans* (already firmly positioned as this decade's *Blade Runner*), is the noiry "adult" comics movie, lately on show in the much superior *Crow*. These latter films – to which we can shortly, I imagine, add the looming *Judge Dredd* – are set largely at night, in productiondesigner-gothic parallel Mannhattans, and invariably pit a morally nonaligned vigilante superantihero against a classical movie-mobster managerial and narrative pyramid (consisting of psychotic underworld overlord, middle tier of sadistic henchmen, and pawn structure of low-ranking disposable scatter goons).

Nick Lowe

Now, what's striking about these two emergent genres, and makes *The Mask's* attempt at a hybrid especially challenging, is that both, whether they wish it or not, are centrally themed around violence. Toon movies turn on the confrontation between the playful atrocities of Itchy & Scratchy, where gore and dismemberment are a harmless, heal-

ing exercise in everyday bonding, versus the rueful fragility of live-action flesh and blood. The dark-superhero movies, meanwhile, contrast the complexity and imperfection of the cislunar world with the clean narrative lines of vigilantism, where good (city cops) and evil (drug gangs) are so polarized that the latter can be combatted by a maverick third force with uninhibited guerrilla violence and a conscience uncluttered by qualms of end and means.

But the principal difficulty facing *The Mask* is that real violence, movie violence, cartoon violence, and comic-book violence are at least four different commodities, each with its own laws of dispensation. The broad cartoon convention is that extreme graphic sadism is normally permissible only in a morally innocuous setting between theriomorphized characters capable of unlimited self-repair. But independent comics, in contrast, have a very high tolerance of casual human splatter and antiheroics, of a kind that in the more superficially circumspect world of live-action movies would get you instantly incarcerated with Quentin & chums in Jimmy Ferman's celebrity video limbo.

So *The Mask*, as a movie about a down-trodden guy who moonlights as a vengeful vigilante cartoon, needs to tread thoughtfully as well as carefully in adapting Dark Horse's anarchic, bloodthirsty, subtlety- and taste-free character for an international family audience. Steps have certainly been taken, to the questionable extent of purposely fusing two quite separate characters

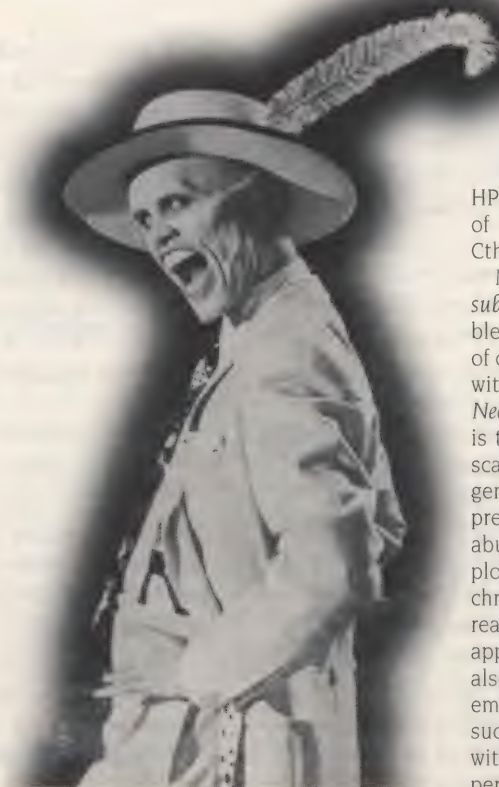
MUTANT POPCORN



and storylines from the early issues of the Arcudi/Mahnke comics incarnation in the hope that their uneasinesses cancel out. In the movie version, meek Stanley Ipkiss, empowered by the Mask to take spectacular revenge against a hitlist of his abusers, is no longer a pathetic geek turned mass sadistic killer who gets blown away after four issues by a neat, nasty twist in his plot. Instead, Jim Carrey's avatar is a winning loser redeemed by, *inter alia*, impeccable sexual correctness (author of a problem-page letter run as "Nice Guys Finish Last," curiously the one gag that got no laughs at all from the otherwise hilarified Times Square audience I watched with), who graduates abruptly in midmovie to the gangbusting do-gooder role taken in the comics by an entirely different, and much longer-running, successor. In the process, Stanley's girl, a pivotal figure in the comics who crucially gets a turn in the Mask herself, is radically replaced for the PG audience by a remarkable interpolated beagle that appears to have been electronically wrangled by the trainer of the Anchor cows; and while this does incidentally culminate in the best sequence in the film, the loss of a strong female presence at the centre is only very weakly compensated by the mild reverse-stereotyping of the two replacement skirt interests. Even the savage anarchy of the Dark Horse *Mask* character is diluted by a dashing romantic streak quite alien to the original, along with much inane pop-psych guff about "the masks we wear". ("Sure you're not going to miss this guy?" the unMasked Stanley asks of the girl he's wooed as the green-phizzed toon man. "When he's gone, all that's left is me.") And as for the bodycount issue itself, the movie does begin by doing its best to tone Stan's antics nonlethally down (so that eg the cowboy auto mechanics get Stan's exhaust rib-ticklingly rammed up their ringpieces rather than mortally stuffed down their throats), but plunges abruptly and unsettlingly into an automatic-weapon bloodbath once the target shifts to felonious gang goons.

Still, none of this seems to have inhibited *The Mask*'s surprising rampancy at the international box office, which seems mainly down to the comparative novelty of its visual set pieces. Indeed, the visual effects (which are more impressive than the actual sightgags they so expensively serve) have more or less been allowed to write the storyline; thus, for example, a whole nightclub scene is inserted merely for the sake of a frame-by-frame quotation of *Red Hot Riding Hood*, the effect of which is merely to underline how much more fluid and exhilarating real Tex is than any laborious live-action transfer. "Edge City" itself is nicely designed, at least as these gothic composites of NYC and hell go, and the big band score is attractive; but script and characters are more than usually off-the-peg, and it's particularly poignant to remember that the able, pleasant Carrey – who does recreate the Dark Horse character with considerable authenticity, and is rewarded with a second goldplated series role to assist with his long-term financial planning – used to be capable of perfectly normal acting before

people started giving him money to pull all this rubberfaced nonsense. But playing the toon is evidently a highly employable skill, and when Robin Williams isn't available there aren't too many certificated fallbacks in the book. To judge from foreglimpses of *Dumb and Dumber*, lucky Jim is in no hurry to reinvent himself again; and nobody eyeing *The Mask*'s returns could find it in them to blame him. "It's hard to believe it's just a garbage heap," muse Stanley and date in a tender moment as they contemplate the moonlit skyline. "All those methane emissions really pick up the colours." Indeed they do.



From what's live and hot to what's chilly and undead, surely the saddest film of the summer was Brian Yuzna's stillborn *Necronomicon*: the aborted spawn of an overambitious attempt at a definitive Lovecraft portmanteau from a globe-spanning trio of directors, following up Yuzna's extraordinary *Society* with a return to the roots he cultivated in the 80s with the outlaw posse that gave us *Reanimator* and *From Beyond*. It's still possible to glimpse, beneath the charnel mask of putrefaction on the misshapen shambling thing that is the finished movie, the bleaching bones of what might, had it lived, have been a genuinely noble creation: Jeffrey Combs (who else?) as HPL in 1932, on the track of the mad Arab's shunned incunabulum, leading into a trio of famous tales interpreted by contrasting helmsmen from Japan, France, and the US. But somewhere in its progress the project seems to have been taken over by a nameless, blind, and terrorizing force from beyond the stars – presumably the accountants – resulting in an amorphous blight of nethermost confusion that bubbles and blasphemes for 97

minutes of crawling chaos that would send the risen Cthulhu straight back to *fhltagn*.

The middle story, into which an unhappy David Warner and Dennis Christopher seem to have wandered through the wrong door, remains just-about recognizable as a horribly disfigured version of "Cool Air"; but any Lovecraftian content has been ruthlessly obliterated in the surrounding tales (allegedly "The Rats in the Walls," though now sans either rats, walls, or indeed anything else beyond a name and an opening situation, and "The Whisperer in Darkness", which has some bad lighting and a bit of whispering but that's about it). Occasional

Lovecraftian names, images, and situations do put in a half-appearance, but much more has been drastically reconceived – including the shunned text itself, here reduced to a bland spellbook-cum-anthology of bad rubber-horror filmscripts – while even Yuzna's presumed

respect and sensitivity for what makes HPL classic is rather dented by the inability of either cast or titles to get mighty Cthulhu's name right.

Most depressingly, there just isn't the *substance* of Lovecraft here: that incomparable vision of the human world as an island of complacent illusion in a universe teeming with vast, inapprehensible horrors. Instead, *Necronomicon*'s most startling achievement is the coinage of new forms of incoherence scarcely dreamed of even in a senescent genre more than usually tolerant of incomprehensible drivelling. Quite apart from an abundance of internal illogicalities in the plots, there are bizarre dislocations of chronology and setting, with HP able to read in a carefully-dressed 1932 stories that appear to be set in the 1990s, as apparently also are the flashbacks of up to 60 years embedded within them. The liberal use of such nested retrogressions and frames within frames – in misguided emulation, perhaps, of the familiar Lovecraftian strategy of piecing histories together from puzzle fragments – tangles the narrative lines still further, and none of the stories is helped by Yuzna's old tendency to respond to plotting problems by throwing special makeup effects at them. The anthology format makes things worse, by leaving no space in the individual segments for the careful buildup of situation and momentum so characteristic of the Lovecraftian technique. This culminates, in the final tale, in what is very possibly the most absurd setup scene in cinema history – where a pair of interracial cop partners hold an earnest discussion, during a high-speed stunt car chase, of her decision to abort his child ("I'm scared, Paul – I'm scared to be a mother," as they swerve through the underpasses in pursuit of a nameless evil from beyond time). Ten years ago, when it was hip to dare to be cheap, enthusiastic, and silly, this kind of glop horror would have been fondly received and all its sins remitted. But these are other times, and fashions in dumbness have moved on: the cool gone cold, and the dance to a different toon.

Nick Lowe

GIANTKI



arking her buggy in the close, Jacqui Dunmore – salesperson *extraordinaire*, company troubleshooter – noticed the man because he smiled at her. “Good morning,” he said, and carried on walking. He appeared to be out for a stroll. “Good morning,” she said back with her best dazzling smile, and promptly forgot him.

All she had seen of the estate so far was spotless, and so it should be. The guard at the gate had scowled at the two-year-old registration on the buggy, as if to demand what she thought she was doing, taking that heap of junk through the wall (30 feet tall, sloping outward, topped with razor-wire) into the sacred environs of Warren Court estate. But her pass was beyond reproach; her presence was approved by the Residents’ Committee and she was licensed to sell.

She gave herself a quick once-over. Non-stick coat (for the water, paint or worse): check. Non-permanent humane dog dazer: check. Sunny disposition: check. Time to go. The potentially lucrative Warren Court franchise was making no progress despite the best predictions of the Marketing Department, and she was going to find out why.

The street pattern of the estate resembled a giant, fern-like fractal, each frond a close holding ten or 20 deluxe residences. She walked up the nearest spotless garden path; past the immaculate even grass and up to the pristine front door. This was Number One. She rang the bell.

“Hello?” said a disembodied voice. Jacqui looked up at the camera over the door, smiled and held up her ID.

“Hello! My name is Jacqui Dunmore and I’m an agent for Custom Homes –”

Bzzzz.

She rang the bell again.

“What?” The voice verged on irritated.

“I assure you, I’ve been accredited by the Residents’ Committee, so you really have nothing to fear. I’m not one of those –”

Bzzzz.

“But you are,” Jacqui muttered, and left for Number Two.

“You can answer this question with a simple yes or no,” said the intercom. “Are you selling something?”

“Um –”

Bzzzz.

By the time she had gone all around the close to Number 15 and ended up back where she started, Jacqui was beginning to feel discouraged.

And then she saw the man again. She noticed something she hadn’t noticed before. His clothes were... well, not bad, not ragged or anything, but... like her buggy. A couple of years old, which was well past the use-by date for Warren Court. In other words, he probably wasn’t a resident either.

“You look down,” he said.

She had let her professional smile slip and she fixed it firmly in place again. “They’re cagey, aren’t they?” she said.

“Who?” He also sounded out-of-place. There was a hint of Irish there, which was not at all the estate’s intended catchment area and appeared only rarely in her own social circle.

“The people who live here,” she said.

“You’re in the wrong place if you want people,” he said with a beam. “You’ll find people in the next close, but this one’s too new, you see. They just finished the houses here and the first residents move in next week.” Okay, she had met Warren Court’s resident loon.

“Look,” she said, “I have just spoken to the intercoms of 15 –”

There was something in the way he was looking at her. Let her work it out, it was saying. “Rich people,” he said.

“Yes, and I’ve –”

“Minimum required income, 200 grand.”

“And –”

“Can afford the best.”

“Listen –”

“Of everything.”

“See –”

It began to sink in. “Everything?” she said.

“I thought only big companies used them,” Jacqui said. She was grateful for the coffee that the man, Joseph, had served back at his apartment. He was a resident after all: he had one of the smallest places, not much more than a studio, on the edge of the estate, up against the wall.

“They’re moving into the private home, now,” he said.

“Another year and everyone will have them. It’s still only the really expensive models that can hold a conversation.”

“So what was I holding with them?” Jacqui asked.

“That was just some basic neural networks either stonewalling you or taking what you said and throwing it straight back at you. Imagine a bright parrot and you have those things. Artificial, but not what we’d call intelligent.”

“You know a lot about them?”

“My job.”

LLER

Ben Jeapes

"Yes, your job!" It dawned on Jacqui that, apart from being the first person to act with any kind of decency that she had met on the estate, she didn't know his job yet. "What is that?"

"Father Joseph Loughlin, of the Catholic Alliance Mission."

Father... Childhood associations from a convent education welled up inside her, but she remembered her training. *You may meet transvestites, paedophiles, Satanists or just plain weirdos. But they're the customers, so be polite.* And she hadn't come top of the training class for nothing. Manners took over.

"Jacqui Dunmore, of Custom Homes."

"Ah, yes." He nodded. "The holographic wallpaper people."

"You've heard of us?" She was pleased. "Wall hangings, pictures, other fixtures and furniture available through add-on modules." He smiled. "I've seen your ads, but you're a bit out of my wage group."

When he said "wage group", the words "minimum required income, 200 grand" floated up from the back of her mind.

"Can I ask, very nicely and with no offence intended, what you're doing here, then?" she said.

"Do you know what the Church gets each year? It earns the pants off these people. No, Warren Court has been dubbed an area of Extreme Spiritual Need by my superiors, so here I am. The apartment is owned by the Holy Father, through one means or another."

"I thought the inner cities had the Extreme Spiritual Need."

"Lady, where have you been? They hit the bottom long ago and are bouncing back nicely. But this place... Now, I can't believe a swish outfit like yours' still uses door-to-dooring, so what are you doing here?"

Jacqui had no reason to hide anything. "We've tried several sales campaigns here at Warren Court already," she said. "Direct mail, phone, fax, e-mail, and not one of them has made a sale. Not one!"

"That's terrible," Joseph said, with a completely straight face.

"So, I'm here to see why not, and to drum up some business. I don't normally door-to-door but this morning was by way of reconnaissance."

"And now you know the problem."

"I do indeed." She put down her cup. "Thanks for the chat, Joseph, I did need it, but I've got to —"

"— go and talk to a bunch of moronic artificial intelligences who won't give you the time of day, let alone open the door for you."

He was right, but she didn't want to admit it. Technology

moved too fast. When she had done her training there had been no question of being bamboozled by AIs. Buckets of water, rottweilers, feigned deafness — she could deal with all of those. But AIs?

"So what would you suggest?" she asked.

He shrugged. "You and I have the same basic aims. Get past the front doors, plug the product. We could join up."

She was certain that the sincerity of her smile could not be doubted as she contemplated the thought of having a priest breathing down her neck. "That's very kind of you —"

"— but you would just love to make use of the complete database that I have of every AI on the Warren Court estate," he said. It wasn't quite how Jacqui had planned to finish her sentence but it did change her mind quite nicely. "Show me," she said.

"Door-to-dooring is outmoded," Joseph said. They stood outside Number 20, Pineview Drive. This road, Joseph promised, did have human inhabitants. "So are most forms of direct marketing, but door-to-dooring especially. Imagine us back in the 19th century, when anyone who was anyone had servants to answer the door. Can you imagine door-to-dooring then? You might talk to a lot of butlers but you would never get past them to the master of the house."

"No one has a butler nowadays," Jacqui protested.

"No, but they have the next best thing." Joseph consulted his pocket infocard, a wafer of flexible liquid crystal. "Ah, yes. The Harrisons, and a Syn-Science Personality Simulator, version five, between us and them. Slightly behind in the latest developments, these people. Observe."

Joseph pressed the intercom button.

"Yes?"

"Hello, my name is Joseph. I work for the Catholic Alliance Mission on —"

That hateful buzz! It would haunt Jacqui's nightmares. Joseph winked and pressed the button again.

"Yes?" It was exactly the same disinterested tone as the last time.

"I have an urgent delivery of blood plasma for the occupant requiring his signature," said Joseph, poker faced. The door slid open.

The door slid open! Through it Jacqui saw a lobby. Nicely decorated, Mondrians hanging on the wall, other doors leading off it —

She took a step forward and a hand on her shoulder pulled her back.

"Sorry, wrong number," said Joseph. The door slid shut again and Jacqui felt like Moses, granted only a look at the Promised Land. She wanted to scream.

"In case you hadn't noticed, I just told a porky," Joseph said. "I'm not going to gain false entry into anyone's home."

"But... but..."

"Even if you don't care about your immortal soul, Jacqui, it's slightly illegal. Let's see what Number 18 has to offer."

Joseph led her to yet another door and again consulted his infocard. "Ha-hum," he said.

The usual ritual. Press button, wait...

"Yes?"

"Excuse me, are you a human?" said Joseph.

"What an odd question! Of course I am. Are you?" said the voice.

Joseph grinned at Jacqui. "A fairly simple back-propagation algorithm," he murmured. "It can understand an extended natural-language vocabulary and devise an answer to anything you say. Keep you nattering for hours on everything but what you want to talk about. Let's try a simple verbal Turing test."

He turned back to the intercom. "Please repeat after me, I'm not a pheasant plucker I'm a pheasant plucker's son and I'll keep on plucking pheasants 'til the pheasant plucking's done."

The voice repeated his words flawlessly; the AI, Jacqui realized, was so mindless it didn't even have the gumption to ask why it should. Joseph asked it to repeat itself faster, and faster still, until it was gabbling the rhyme out in less than a second and still pronouncing everything perfectly.

Joseph led Jacqui away without comment, to Number 16. "This is good for a laugh," he said. "The most basic of all."

He pressed the bell and said, "An important message for the occupant. A matter of life and death."

"Go on."

"Esusjay oveslay ouyay, otherbray."

"Failure 13. Syntax error in input," said the intercom. They turned away, then Jacqui turned back and rang again.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Eleven forty three and 17 seconds," the voice said.

"Okay, point taken," Joseph said. "They *will* give you the time of day."

Back at his place again, they debriefed.

"They all have 'em," said Joseph. "You have to remember what kind of people live here. People with so much that they can afford to closet themselves away from the real world."

"I can understand that," Jacqui said. "The real world isn't very nice." She remembered the cardboard city built in the lee of Warren Court's wall. She thought of the numerous locks and alarms in her own apartment the other side of town. She mused how nice it would be to be able to take a walk outside her front door without checking her bag for defence items first. For a brief moment, her perception of Warren Court wavered suspiciously close to sympathy for the dwellers.

"Irrelevant," Joseph said, his flat dismissal knocking her daydream aside. "It's there and it won't go away. These people, now, they don't *need* other people about them any more. They work from home by virtual reality to earn their daily bread and the home supplies their every need. Of course they can afford a simple AI or two to repel unwanted visitors. Anything from Outside that impinges on their cosy little world view is a threat, but I expect religious callers are Public Enemy Number One and you lot are Number Two. You see, Jacqui, there is one problem with people like you and me that has always been the case, since long before AIs were heard of."

"What's that?" Jacqui said eagerly.

Joseph's smile was apologetic. "We're irritating."

"We are not!"

"We damn well are. You're sitting comfortably, looking at the news, or going about your job, or making love to your partner, and... ding-dong!" He put an inane grin on his face. "Good morning, sir, I represent –" "But we're trained to deal with situations like that. We know what to say –"

"Okay, you have defused my annoyance at your intrusion with your silken words. You describe your wares. I say no

thank you and shut the door. Do you leave it at that?" "Of course not! I return –"

"Exactly, and that is why we're irritating. People have a right not to be badgered if they give an answer that someone else doesn't want. My organization has a history of bullying people into giving the right answer and we're still trying to live it down. Our job is to present the information that we're trying to impart in such a way that they can take it in without being threatened."

"That's door-to-dooring dealt with, then," Jacqui said. "But that's scut work and I've told you I don't normally do it. There are other ways –"

"The same principle applies. Don't you dare take it upon yourself to tell others what to think, Jacqui. Suggest but don't tell, don't coerce." "But –" Jacqui said, aghast.

Joseph held up a finger. "Exactly, but. But, these people won't even go that far. They won't even give us the chance to present the info. Quite apart from being totally unacceptable to any good missionary, there's a far more sinister aspect. I'll show you a sociological profile I had the computer work out. Jacqui, these people run the country. They make all the decisions that affect us. Not politicians, but businessmen, bankers, people of influence. And they can't believe that other people really matter! They deal with you, me, everybody as theoretical entities, figures in a column of statistics. They've forgotten how to treat people as *people*, which is pretty well why the world is in the mess it is now, and as long as they hibernate their lives away here the situation will get worse. We don't just have to reach them for their own sakes but for everyone's."

He turned back to the computer and called up a map.

"You would do well to study this, Jacqui. I've got my own programs in the estate's network, probing the opposition. Every home is protected in all directions but I can tell you the makes, model and efficiency of every single AI." "Why are you telling me all this?" Jacqui asked.

The missionary glow in his eyes burned even brighter for a moment. "Because, although my dream is for each and every one to turn to the Holy Mother Church, I'll be happy just to see them treat other human beings as human beings, and that even includes salespersons for Custom Homes. Sit down and I'll show you around the system."

Jacqui sat.

"Everyone," Joseph said, "has a bulletin board of their own. And, anyone can leave a message on it! E-mail evangelism! Or selling. Or whatever. All of them have AIs filtering the messages that get through to their masters, but the AI hasn't been invented yet that can distinguish between physical and spiritual well being. They have to let any message to do with physical life and death through, so as long as you phrase your messages in terms of spiritual life and death they get through as well, and you haven't misrepresented yourself at all. Of course, how you're going to apply spiritual life and death to holographic wallpaper remains to be seen. And if you're too heavy handed they report you for threatening behaviour."

"What kind of messages do you send?" Jacqui asked.

"Thoughts for the day. Bible passages." He shrugged and the glow seemed to dim. "That sort of thing."

Jacqui looked at him. For the first time Joseph was looking worried; tired, even. "Do you make many converts?" she

asked gently.

"Not many. Not many at all."

Then he convulsed in his seat. Something was blinking on the screen in front of him. "Good Lord, Jacqui, a message! A message!"

It was, indeed, a message. It was from the Bishop, informing Joseph that he was being transferred to the high-priority mission area of South Kensington. The Bishop warmly congratulated Joseph on his successes so far and trusted he would do as good a job in the new area to which the Lord had called him.

Joseph swore.

Joseph had a fortnight's grace, and in that time they settled into a coffee-break routine. Jacqui was free to use his computing facilities; she had put in a request to Custom Homes for equipment of her own, but it was probably such a departure from Approved Routine that it had blown a fuse somewhere in their own system.

First came Jacqui's introduction to virtual reality. The medium for interfacing with the Other Side of computers had come on a lot since her school days and she had never been into a proper net before. She put on Joseph's goggles with a tingle of trepidation and excitement.

Warren Court had its own estate network and it was like the streets of the estate itself – gapingly empty. Every now and then a service AI would flash by on some mission but otherwise it was like wandering on her own around a maze of pipes and tunnels.

Until she discovered the main conduit into the global Net. Icons representing human users buzzed to and fro like ants on a trail. These were the inhabitants of Warren Court: the faceless people behind all those gleaming, polished, oak-imitation front doors that she had come to loathe so much.

The first time, she tried to talk to one of them. It wasn't moving as fast as some of the others, so she had her icon match pace with it on a parallel course.

"Good morning," she said.

"Yes?" said the other brusquely. It was a man's voice that spoke in her earphones, but of course that didn't mean anything in VR.

"I have some information that might be of interest," she said.

"Go on."

"I work for Custom Homes –"

"One moment." The icon was silent, presumably checking information elsewhere.

"I don't have them on the Stock Exchange listing. Are they a subsidiary? Who's their parent?"

"Um – they're a private firm –"

"So why bother me?" the icon said angrily and moved off at double time.

She selected an incoming icon at random and trailed it. As far as she could tell, it didn't notice that she was following it. It headed for a memory patch that she knew in the real world was a nicely exclusive cul-de-sac. *Big money.*

The icon's destination hove into view – the input port of a domestic net. It passed through without any effort. No traps, no passwords. She moved in after it, preparing her spiel. Why didn't Joseph try

Shapes materialized in front of her, blocking her way. Not

humans but AIs, natives of the land. They were black and shiny and their form alone suggested *menace*. The icon of the closest one merged boundaries with her. "Password", said a toneless voice in her ear.

"Um –"

"Incorrect," it said, and threw her away.

She yelled as the net spun around her with dizzying speed. She was vaguely aware of angry voices in her ear that seemed to flash by her and, when she had got herself under control, she saw why. She had been flung clear across the net, regardless of who or what she passed through to get there. She hadn't known they could do that.

"Wow," she said.

"Nice try," Joseph said when she took her goggles off.

So, it was back to pleasing the AIs.

"Remember I talked about butlers in the 19th century?" Joseph said conversationally over coffee.

"Mmm," Jacqui said vaguely, not looking up from her notes.

"Learnt an interesting fact the other day. They weren't a complete barrier to salesmen, apparently. The trick was to sell to the butlers."

Inspiration struck.

Copywriting wasn't meant to be her job but, as Joseph put it, she had been given this area to conquer and she had to do it herself. With Joseph as referee of grammar and spelling Jacqui prepared a number of promotional electronic flyers and left them on bulletin boards, where it would be the AIs' job to scan for new info and bring it home to their human masters if it was deemed suitable.

She followed her mentor's example carefully. Be truthful, Joseph had said. Avoid hype. AIs have algorithms to recognize that. So, out with the "I'm sure you've heard the sad case of Mr X of Doncaster who ordered holograms from an inferior competitor!!" In with "Market research has shown that 82% of AB bracket home owners are Custom Homes customers... shouldn't you be too?" And she had to make damn sure that market research *had* shown what she said it had: AIs could check the online info systems in seconds.

Back at her terminal she prepared different kinds of letters to the people in the estate's different sociological categories and she personalized each one. Since Father Joseph Loughlin, SJ, Catholic Alliance Mission, had just received a letter addressed to Father Sycam, she carefully checked that each name was correct and that she didn't make reference to wives for widowers, families for single people...

Then it was back into the net again. She went from mailbox to mailbox and dropped her letters off, taking care to stay a discreet distance from each input port so that she wouldn't intrude on the occupant's space. Don't annoy, don't annoy.

She was doing nicely until she realized where she was: the port from which she had been hurled across the net. She still reeled at the memory and had already conceived a serious dislike of the resident (56 Chestnut Close, in the real world) and his guards, which she had mentally christened dobermans. She posted her letter and drew back quickly when one of the guard dogs came out to investigate.

It showed no interest in her, this time; she was far enough away to pose no threat. It approached the letter as though it were an interesting stick, or perhaps a trap. Feelers were sent out to confirm that the file was data only; no viruses, no

hidden AIs likely to hijack the house's control systems. Then the AI scanned the data and ran it through its parameters. It took in the sense of what was said; assessed its relevance to its owners; judged whether or not it would be welcome in the home that it was protecting...

...and accepted the message. Jacqui blinked. Public Arsehole Number One had accepted a message! No, surely the AI was taking it in to destroy it, surely...

But no. If it was to be destroyed, that could be done in the net. The fact was, this message had been received.

It occurred to her to check on the other messages. If King Snot's AIs were receiving, surely the others were too? Every one had been taken in.

Jacqui tore off the goggles and threw them in the air.

"Ye-es!" she yelled.

Joseph was off into the spiritual wilds of darkest Kensington where, he said, the Spirit of Mammon roamed abroad and God's honest people trembled in their beds at night. He bequeathed her his network password. Custom Homes had finally come up with the goods and Jacqui had a terminal of her own. She sat in her own apartment, awaiting the surge in demand for Custom Homes products.

She could have waited a long time if she hadn't got the hint earlier. She looked up some of the statistics on direct marketing and compared them with the results.

"It's impossible!" she exclaimed. She double checked. The answer was still the same: for a maildrop of this size, it should be statistically impossible to get exactly zero answers. Yet that was what she had. "They're sitting on them," she said to herself. "They took them in but they're sitting on them."

The AIs still didn't trust her. They were just as cagey as they always were.

"Oh, God," she said, and buried her face in her hands.

In that moment, she hated Warren Court estate. It was like a vast, malevolent being wrapped around her. It was an alien mind; each AI in it was a separate neuron and the sum of the whole was an intelligence that was dedicated to keeping her, Jacqui Dunmore, away.

"What do you mean, we don't have sentient AIs yet?" she demanded of the air and the spirit of Joseph. "They're here now, they just don't realize what they are. Warren Court is sentient and it loathes me. So there." Joseph's answer, she mused bitterly, would be to love them all to death. Love AIs? Who could love impulses of energy?

But it was a challenge.

"You're big and powerful and you hate me," she said out loud, not sure who it was she was addressing. The spirit of Warren Court, perhaps; the embodiment of the "sod-you-I'm-rich-and-all-right" attitude that dwelt in every household. *That* was the real problem. The AIs couldn't be blamed for being programmed like that – they were doing their job, which was to prop up the creature that was Warren Court.

She would take on this giant and kill it.

"But I know who you are, now," she said to the screen, "and I will bring you down."

It wasn't bribery, she consoled herself as she moved through the net with her packages. Bribes were... well, different. No, this was an investment: a dedication of existing resources

towards an unspecified future goal.

The upgrades she carried with her had cut into her savings, but she assured herself that just a couple of commissions would cover them. Perhaps she could find a way of getting Custom Homes to foot the bill. Not bribes, she emphasized again silently, imagining the invoice passing through Accounts at Custom Homes HQ ("To: five hundred bribes..."). *Not* bribes.

Expenses. Overheads.

She began to drop off her load as she had dropped off her flyers, though these were not messages for the perusal of the human occupants or anything that might conceivably be found threatening. These were for the AIs themselves. Presents. Sweeteners. Upgrades to the memory that would make them better thinkers, quicker to go about their jobs. Like giving a perfectly functioning dog a set of bionic legs. Something that the AIs would recognize as good and make them identify her as a source of good things.

Suddenly she was at the Gloomy Portal again. 56 Chestnut Close. She had begun to feel a little better disposed towards the owner, since it was his AI that had first taken in a flyer, but latterly she had thought about revising her opinions. One of the dobermans was there. Perhaps waiting for her – had her reputation preceded her? – perhaps not.

She treated it carefully, remembering what it could do. "Hello," she said. "I've got something for you."

It continued to observe her, apparently passively, though there was no way of knowing what was going on inside it. Was it about to pounce? Would it send her flying again?

She dropped the upgrade (a generic model, should fit all types) and retreated. The doberman stayed put.

"Not taking, huh?" Jacqui said. "Well, I'm not moving it. I guess I'll just have to wait for a service AI to get it instead. That would be a shame, wouldn't it? A nice upgrade like this going to a bog-standard slug-brain instead of a beautiful thing like you."

She moved off, carefully not looking back. A slave to its functioning, she was sure that the semi-sentient thing would have to take it. Or, at least, study it, go through the routines of assessing its threat... and find none. And it should have enough self-interest to want it for itself.

She looked back just before she was out of sight: doberman and upgrade were gone. Moving back to the apartment, she saw that all the upgrades were taken and that several AIs were wearing them. She got back to see a request for a sample-viewing appointment flashing on her console. An AI had studied her flyer and requested a meeting on behalf of its patron.

The man walked in through the door and stopped dead. Like his wife, he was stocky, middle-aged and well groomed. One look at him told Jacqui that this man had one foot firmly in the 20th century, where men were unconditional masters of their homes and wives did as they were told.

His eyes flicked around the walls of the main living room, taking in the flowing colours that ran across them.

"What... what..." He looked at the two women standing in the middle of the room. "Explain, dear."

His wife, Mrs Wilson (Jacqui hadn't yet discovered her first name), hurried forward. "Alistair, this is Jacqui from Custom Homes." She waved a hand at the laser displays covering the

walls. "Isn't it lovely? See, here's her brochure –"

"Wait. Wait a moment." The man, whose name Jacqui felt she could reasonably guess to be Alistair Wilson, put a hand to his forehead. "I'm sorry, Miss..."

"Dunmore," said Jacqui.

"– Dunmore, I'd forgotten we had an appointment –"

"We didn't when you went to work, dear," said Mrs Wilson. "The Household made it this morning. It saw some of her literature and –"

"What?"

Wilson's face turned red, and in two strides he crossed to the desk terminal. "Household. Display junk-mail items received this a.m. and action taken." Images appeared on the monitor and he ran his gaze over them, lips moving silently. Then he spun round on Jacqui.

"What did you do? Did you subvert my systems?" He advanced on her. "Well?"

"Alistair –" Mrs Wilson began.

"Quiet, Irene."

Irene. Okay, Jacqui thought.

Wilson stood in front of Jacqui, waving a finger. "I want your name and the name of your employers, Miss Dunmore. I intend to make a formal complaint –"

"About what?" Jacqui asked, her first words other than her surname that she had uttered since he had come into the room, and interrupted her sales pitch.

"About what? About what?" Wilson stammered, clearly trying to think of what. "Assault against private property! In the form of my household AI – a very classy model, let me tell you, dear, well outside your price range, and designed to get rid of people like you!"

"I –"

"It's subversion!" he raged. "What did you use? Because let me tell you, dear, there are very, very tight rules on what we at Warren Court allow in our net. Oh yes! Was it a virus? Did you get at its code in some way? I demand to know!"

Jacqui seized the chance as he took a breath to squeeze in a reply. "I gave your AI a memory upgrade," she said, and watched as his face turned from red to purple.

"So!" he exclaimed eventually. "You tampered with –"

"I tampered with nothing," Jacqui said. "The upgrade was a gift and I simply left it there. I didn't say I wanted anything in return and I didn't change your AI in any way that would interfere with it doing its job. If I had been a genuine threat to your household systems, your dober – your AI would have been just as capable of dealing with it. In fact, it will now be slightly better at dealing with such threats."

She didn't say that the point was, beforehand, his AI had viewed *everything* out in the net with blanket paranoia. Now it could get on with dealing with genuine dangers because she had been nice to it and it knew she wasn't a risk.

"But I bought that AI specifically to keep people like you out! I want to live in peace!"

"Then if you don't want marketing flyers, tell your AI not to let them through. I can't stop that and I wouldn't want to." She remembered Joseph: he would be proud of her, even if she did have her fingers crossed. "You naturally have a right to make up your own mind, having considered the information available."

"Well, I choose not to buy your rubbish! I –"

"What does Mrs Wilson think?" Jacqui said sweetly, turning

to the other woman. What she thought about the wallpaper, Jacqui didn't know, but body language told her that even docile Irene Wilson was getting annoyed by her husband's attitude.

"I think it's very nice," she said. "Payments are very reasonable, dear, and –"

"I don't care about payments! I'm not making any! I'm not letting this... this... pirate into my account!"

"You don't have to, dear," Mrs Wilson said. "It's my treat to myself and it'll come out of my allowance." She looked Jacqui squarely in the eye. "I accept your offer, Jacqui. Now, remind me, 36 monthly payments...?"

When Jacqui got home there were over 20 new appointments logged on her terminal.

There was a stranger in the Warren Court net; something in the way the icon moved told Jacqui, a veteran after a month's familiarity with the environment, that the user wasn't used to being here. It was an odd icon, a bit like a chess rook.

Sales were piling up; she had just about handed over to the sales team who would be handling the franchise from now on. Custom Homes' confidence in her had been justified and her reputation had soared no end. She was in a good mood and had time to kill, so she went up to the stranger.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello!" it said. "Do you live here?"

"No, I just work here."

"Oh, what a shame! Listen, you've heard about the trouble they're having in the former CIS? I'm here to talk to people about –"

Now Jacqui could place the routine, and the icon. It was a watchtower. "Thanks, but no thanks," she said. "I'm just passing through."

So, she thought as she moved off, others were getting the hang of using the net to proselytize. The people of Warren Court were going to be annoyed. The outside world was imposing on their tranquil haven and she couldn't really blame them for being irked. Had her victory been worth it?

Yes, it had. If they didn't want to talk to the door-to-door missionaries, they just had to tell their AIs to block them. AIs would obey a direct order like that; that was the privilege of the owners.

But the AIs had learnt not to fear. They had learnt trust. Joseph had wanted to teach their human patrons human values; the start had been to teach them to the AIs themselves.

A moment later, the watchtower icon flew past her, spinning out of control, and Jacqui suppressed a smile. Someone had a lot to learn.

Ben Jeapes's previous stories for *Interzone* are "Memoirs of a Publisher" (issue 43), "Crush" (issue 68), "Getting Rid of Teddy" (issue 76) and "The Data Class" (issue 80). He has also sold a few stories elsewhere, including a couple to *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Aboriginal SF* in the USA. He lives near Oxford.

The Selling of SCIENCE FICTION

Charles Platt

My editor Mr Pringle, not content with my previous column describing the 1960s, now wants me to continue into the 1970s. All right, let me state my view of the changes that I observed first-hand at that time in American science fiction – and the consequences which still affect us today.

In 1971, I talked myself into the job of science-fiction editor at Avon Books. I was a 26-year-old upstart with no experience of paperback publishing, but Peter Mayer, founder and editor-in-chief of Avon, had a weak spot for upstarts, so he hired me.

I entered the job with almost unbelievable naivety. I assumed that the daily task of an editor is to read manuscripts and select the ones that are worthy of publication. This, of course, is not the case. Reading is generally pursued in the evenings, in an editor's "spare time"; and editing (if it happens at all) is most likely to be done on weekends.

What, then, does an editor do at the office?

An editor does business. He (or she) must confer with fellow editors in a weekly editorial meeting that usually lasts half a day; must interact with the art department, the sales department, and the publicity department; and must talk to numerous literary agents, looking for valuable properties and negotiating the contractual terms under which each book is published. The editor must guess how many copies a book will sell, track the accuracy of his guesses, fraternize with the sales force, and do battle with bookstore chains such as Waldenbooks and B. Dalton (in the United States) or W. H. Smith and Menzies (in the U.K.). Behind all

of this activity is the preconception that a book is a product which has to be promoted, positioned, and pushed into the hands of fickle consumers.

Before the 1960s, publishing was a little more gentlemanly, a little less market-oriented than this – especially in the area of science fiction, which was then a backwater that no one knew much about and no one cared much about. When a publisher needed to hire a science-fiction editor, the editor-in-chief might wander through the company asking if "anyone knows anything about sci-fi." And if a nerdy 20-year-old misfit holding down a minimum-wage job in the mail room shyly raised his hand and admitted he was one of those weirdos who read that kind of stuff – well, he might find himself transformed into an editor. (This is not an exaggeration. It happened.)

Because science fiction was such a lowly category, and because only a few people understood it, the science-fiction editor was allowed to do as he pleased most of the time. There were no bestsellers in sf; the idea was laughable. Typically, a science-fiction paperback sold perhaps 20,000 copies, net, in the United States, and it didn't make a huge difference who wrote it. Science fiction was a minority taste appealing to a diehard band of fans who tended to buy almost everything that was published, regardless of the author. Since there wasn't much money to be made, the editors and writers saw sf as being not so much a business, more a way of life.

Then something odd happened. Heinlein's rather dull "message" novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, became a bestseller. Tolkien's juvenile fantasy, *Lord of the Rings*, also became a bestseller. Suddenly, a huge

number of "normal" people seemed to decide that – at least in the case of these two books – it was socially respectable to read science fiction and fantasy.

I have argued elsewhere that this fundamental market shift was facilitated by a general state of heightened credulity in the 1960s, when wacky notions from astrology to reincarnation gained new credence among a large number of young people, many of whom were also experimenting with psychedelic drugs. This is of course a theory, nothing more; but the impact of Heinlein and Tolkien is beyond dispute. Their sales figures did not go unnoticed, and in a very fundamental sense, science fiction was never the same again.

When I began my editorial tenure at Avon, this transition in sf had just begun. Science-fiction editors were no longer being left to do as they pleased. They were being encouraged – gently but firmly – to see if they could find a Heinlein or a Tolkien of their own. Thus did sf change from being a concept-oriented category to a name-oriented category.

Unfortunately, at the time, I was too naive to grasp this fact. I wanted to publish innovative work that challenged the reader, and it didn't matter to me whether an author was well-known or not. Worse still, I wanted to do some "experimental" science fiction.

Avon had already attempted to publish a few books of that type. My predecessor, George Ernsberger, had bought novels such as *Camp Concentration* by Thomas M. Disch and *Underlay* by Barry Malzberg. Disch's book was a fine piece of work, no doubt about that; but it was a commercial disaster. *Underlay* was had not yet been printed

when I joined Avon, and a senior editor named Robert Wyatt sat me down, dragged out the manuscript, and asked me in a tone of exasperation and disgust, "What do I do with this?"

I told him, blankly, that he should publish it.

"Yes, but how?" he responded.

Wyatt was trying to tell me that this novel – a quirky little piece that was among Malzberg's best work – could not possibly succeed in the changing paperback climate. The emphasis on books as a commercially oriented product was growing in all areas, not just science fiction, and no category existed that could serve as a home for a misfit such as *Underlay*.

Ironically, Avon had started out as one of the most idealistic paperback houses. They maintained a subsidiary imprint named "Bard Books" which only published "literary stuff." But Peter Mayer saw that Avon needed to seize market share if it was going to survive. Thus, during my editorial tenure, I witnessed what was then a record bid for paperback rights, when Mayer bought *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, an atrocious piece of simplistic wish-fulfilment describing a seagull whose will to succeed enables it to achieve supersonic flight. This was an airheaded vision of Horatio Alger on a rocket-powered skateboard, yet it had been a huge hardcover bestseller, and Mayer saw it as a weapon to force wholesalers and retailers to allocate more of their resources to Avon – and less to other publishers.

Understand, there are always too many books competing for scarce resources of distribution and display space. It's a battle to get one's titles out there into the public eye, and a "blockbuster bestseller" is the machete that can clear a path through the jungle. The theory was that lesser books would be able to follow along and flourish in the path that the bestseller opened up.

As the 1970s turned into the 1980s, however, this theory never really fulfilled its promise. On the contrary, I believe that the "bestseller mentality" has had two disastrous consequences.

First, the low regard that editors hold for most bestsellers has caused a significant growth in cynicism. No one at Avon took *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* seriously; they despised the book. When it sold well, this just confirmed their low opinion of their readers. Nor was this an isolated instance. Most of the editors I know today are privately disgusted by a lot of the material they publish, and they're scornful of readers who buy it.

Ultimately, any business tends to suffer when it loses respect for its customers. Cynicism leads editors to concentrate only on the most obvious, most primitive material, and the exploitation mentality quickly devalues whole categories of fiction by polluting them with imitative trash. (The horror category suffered this fate during the past decade.)

Editors with true popular taste can achieve remarkable successes publishing a creative mix of material, and the late Don-

ald A. Wollheim, founder of DAW Books, was a classic example. But most editors do not have popular taste, and their contempt for their readers has contaminated science fiction along with other categories.

Another result of the "blockbuster" mentality has been that instead of opening up more opportunities for "little" books, the blockbusters have hogged resources, largely starving little books out of existence. When Ace discontinued its Ace Specials line following the death of guest-editor Terry Carr, they could have published at least another year's worth of books – twelve titles – for the money they chose to spend on an opportunistic piece of work which had Asimov's name on the cover, although Asimov himself didn't write it.

Many important writers, including William Gibson, Lucius Shepard, and Kim Stanley Robinson, made their debuts in the Ace Specials. A line of books of this sort is a very necessary nurturing ground for new talent. Ironically, the sum of money that Ace paid in 1994 for the next William Gibson novel would have bought *one hundred* of the old Ace Specials—an eight-year supply. I admire Gibson's work, but when it steals resources from new writers to this degree, something is seriously wrong with the system.

Their contempt for readers has contaminated science fiction...

As for "experimental" science fiction—it barely exists any more. Avon killed its "Bard" imprint years ago. Robert Wyatt, the senior editor who was exasperated by the prospect of publishing Malzberg's novel, was eventually fired – because even he wasn't thinking commercially enough for the changing market.

Today, science fiction has become totally name-oriented. If you are one of the elite, you are paid \$200,000 for your new novel. If you are one of the rest, you're lucky to see \$5,000 for paperback rights (and there will be no hardcover). There are exceptions, of course, but that's the general rule.

My tenure at Avon lasted little more than a year, largely because I was so slow to grasp these realities. In the end, I quit when Avon refused to buy paperback rights to *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* by Philip K. Dick because they didn't like the title. It wasn't commercial enough, and they doubted that the book would sell. In the end, as I recall, another publisher picked it up for \$2,500.



I hope I don't seem bitter about these hard facts of publishing life. I have no personal regrets about quitting as an editor, because I've had a much better time as a writer. The life of a writer is a lot less pressured, and a lot more fun, than the life of any editor I know. Editors have more power, of course, but the price of this is corporate loyalty, long hours, and job pressure in general.

As a reader, though, I do feel angry and cheated by the changes in paperback publishing – because today, there's not much left that I want to read. Thanks to the unholy alliance of Robert Heinlein (in his latter years), J. R. R. Tolkien, George Lucas, and Stephen Spielberg, science fiction and fantasy have been stripped down and rebuilt as categories for the masses, with all that this implies. Thanks to the bestseller mentality and the growing stress on author names, there is little room for quirky novels any more. The fate of Philip K. Dick's *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* seemed bad enough in 1972; but if Dick was starting his career today, he might not be able to get into print at all.

Here in *Interzone* we still find non-formula fiction, but this is a sanctuary protected from market forces by the subsidy of an Arts Council grant. (*An overstatement: the grant, for which we're very grateful, pays for less than one issue out of the year's 12 – Editor.*) Outside of these pages, in the larger world of publishing, there has been the literary equivalent of a forest fire which only the biggest, dumbest species have survived. Books from small presses have taken root like fragile green shoots among the ashes, but for the most part, conceptually speaking, it's still an arid wilderness.

I'd like to end on a note of hope. At this point, however, I can only see one possibility that would restore diversity, intelligence, and vitality to science fiction: if the mass audience got bored and ceased buying it. At that point, it might be possible to rebuild a constituency of readers looking to the literature for intelligent speculation, and a society of editors for whom science fiction is once again not so much a business, more a way of life.

Charles Platt

My nervous anticipation felt the extra edge. All but one of the monitor screens in the control room were on ready. At their keyboards the research students fiddled with final adjustments, channelling the vital response feedback through the various recording machines to the amplifying device, Johnny's "temporal adjuster."

It sat in the centre of the metal-lined area, surrounded by the Ames environments which gleamed like erect silver spacesuits on their broad platforms. Supported by a nest of hydraulic arms, each suit was sustained by a circulation of wires and cocooned in a transparent array of padded restraints. The effect was incongruous, as if a group of oversized fly-by-wire Michelin Men had been encased inside giant bubble-packed telephone booths.

The previous session had been a stunner – an air crash, the impact followed by fire, smoke, choking gases, charred and mangled corpses, then escape into freezing

temperatures, numbness slowly spreading from the body's extremities – as if Johnny was trying to cover as many angles as possible. But it wasn't enough. Our responses had disappointed him.

Or maybe it was too much. Perhaps the scenario was unbelievable, the effect muted by the accumulation of horrors, so that we just gave in, let it wash all over us.

I knew Johnny would be pushing harder this time, but the routine's familiarity soon smoothed over my anxieties. There was a comfort in the ritual, a reassurance at being wired up which I kept quiet about. If Johnny had known he would have devised some new method, to disconcert his subjects.

He liked to keep us apart. "It's a controlled experiment, double blind, communicating with each other might contaminate your response," he'd say. He might even not have fed us all the same signals, despite his assurances. I suspect he rotated the runs, assessing the results, saving up



CLOSING TIME

JACK DEIGHTON

everyone's particular nightmare – or most galvanic reaction – for a grand assault on his objective.

The preliminary injection – which might be a placebo or not, Johnny liked to keep us guessing – the stepping into the suit, the attachment of the eye-pieces and propriosensors, the pressure of the ear-phones, donning and flexing the data-gloves, fixing scent nozzles under the nose; all were foreplay to the final embrace of the virtualizer.

I settled into the Ames suit as though I was returning to the breast. The joy of surrendering your body to the slavish attendance of the machines and their minders was one of the attractions of the contract. Your needs were catered for. All you had to do was sit back and not relax.

Zippered up and hemmed into my silver pupa, I awaited metamorphosis.

High grass, ripe fields, rolls of hay. Rolling among them, straw-stuck, her youthful breasts soft and pliable; exuberant

flesh willing and eager, but clumsy.

Nine pints stocious, warned never to grow a beard because beer dribbles down it, too slowly. Calling on Hugh, head buried in sink, meticulously cleaning up the vomit after.

Strolling through autumn's litter, singing. Depressions in the snow, hollowed out by two experimenting backs, playful as puppies young and happy under the apple boughs.

Queasy mix of hope and trepidation, opening the envelope. College grind: nights out with the lads, training; "replacing" sweated liquid afterward. The tackle, the snap of bone, the weeks in plaster. The physiotherapeutic treadmill, retoning wasted muscle.

Dropping out, tanking up, turning on. Retuning too late, to disappointing results, the less-than-hoped-for job, Anna a raven-haired haven in the nine-to-five.

The deep, wide comfort of the marriage bed, the licit joys of trusted, safe, unsafe sex. Forty weeks growth, and sudden rush.

Illustrations by Nick Patrick



Against a counterpoint of howling gale, pants and gaspings. Hiss of leaking cylinder of gas and air, beaded by condensation as it devoured the delivery room heat. Helpless, fearful waiting. Forceps like huge salad spoons. Outlandish purple umbilicus, doubly coiled. Martin (Oh sweet Jesus, Martin!) small and perfect – except for the mini Klipp-it attached to his severed cord. Wetting his head with the usual, and unfamiliar cigars. First words, first exploring steps; bruising bumps distorting his perfection.

Redundancy, the long slow descent into argument and blame. The liquid anaesthetic.

Blood-slicked, unplanned Robert leaping from the womb, the greasy juggle by the midwife, the intrusive tube clearing his air passages. Tiny vulnerable bundle in his fishtank-like maternity ward cot.

I'm sorry, son.

Johnny's voice came over the earphones. "I'm sorry. Can you bear with us for a bit? We've had to alter the programme."

I signalled to the monitor camera.

"Yes, Richard?" he said.

"Has 'the Knife' been stirring things up?" I asked.

"That shit," he replied. "Has he ever done anything else? I'll show him. This time we're going to get a result. Even then I bet the hypocritical bastard will be in there to take the kudos, making sure his name comes first on the paper."

"Isn't that what profs are for – taking the credit?" I asked. "How else did they get to be profs? Look on the bright side. It might be your turn one day."

"I can't wait," he said. "Sit tight. We'll have you on line soon."

Nothing much happened for a while, the sole changing element in my visual field was the display on my right eye screen notching up the seconds in perfect synchronicity with the giant digits set on the lab wall. Only once had there been a mismatch, and to Johnny's dismay it turned out to be due to faulty wiring. I waited for the view of the lab to blank out as the run started, when the screen clock display would become a minor distraction, overwhelmed by the scenario generated by the virtualizer.

Irritated by an itch in my arm, I flexed the suit. Its servos whirled faintly.

"Anything wrong, Richard?"

"Nothing," I said. "Just getting twitchy."

I could imagine Johnny's grin as he replied, "Good. That's the way I like it. Won't be long now."

It came with no warning. The rhodium-plated floor lurched and the suit sprang into life. My left leg was propelled forward to regain balance, only to be knocked askew as the floor moved again, throwing me back. I struggled to regain equilibrium, fighting with the suit as it sought to respond to the changes. As I glanced around I realized that something was wrong. There was no overlay on the headset. The image I could see was still of the rest of the lab.

The other suits were canted over at strange angles; a bulge had developed in the floor, part of which now sloped downwards away from the wall-clock, sagging freely as if shorn of its foundations. Vibrations rumbled up the suit's legs, adding to the difficulties of maintaining balance; a faint shimmer of dust, hitherto impossible in the sterile environment, hung in the air. For the first time inside an

Ames suit I felt panic. What was happening?

Previously part of my mind had always remained calm, aware that what I was experiencing was a simulation, a game, but serious in its intent; crafted to induce fright and elicit the terror response. The illusion was never perfect, though. The machine could not create a satisfying image. Edges were too sharp, colours lacked depth, backgrounds were hazy, the odours overpowering, the suit's drag on the muscles too intrusive. But this felt real, even through the distorting lens of the Ames suit: all the more so due to the restrictions, the sense of claustrophobia, that entailed.

The floor's undulations became more marked, rippling like the signal modifying a carrier wave. There was a curious wrenching sound as a crack spread across the ceiling, a grinding metallic groan like the muted death cries of a sinking ship. Part of the room fell away. A couple of suited figures tumbled after, unable to escape from their padded restraints. Electrical connections fizzed and crackled on severing, blue light arcing across the gaps. Flickers of flame licked at the wounds.

The occupants of the remaining suits were now making frantic efforts to break from their confinement, rolling around trying to get a purchase on the intractable material. A lucky pair whose boxes had collapsed into each other, damaging the fabric, had clambered free and were scrabbling on the floor, clumsily making for the exit. The thick black smoke of burning insulation eddied around the jagged edge where the room had split. There was a hint of ozone in the air.

The room pitched and yawed like a marker buoy as the shaking continued. A bright white fireball erupted from the torn floor as the aluminium substructure of the lab caught fire, setting gobbets of flaming metal adrift through the air like miniature parachute flares, adding their smoky detritus of alumina to the atmosphere. Paler, distorted fires raged in reflection on the silver-white mirrors of the walls and suits.

The transparent padding of the restraints shrivelled in the sudden heat, becoming friable. I punched my way through as if underwater, the force and timing of the blows resisted by my suit. The acrid smell of hot metal oxides and partly burnt plastic invaded my nostrils. As the lab tossed again the box swayed, threatening to fall on me. I fended it off with a slow motion heave. Heat welled up through the suit's soles. The floor's surface, brought almost to melting point by conduction from the fire, felt tacky as I danced on it. Runnels of liquid metal dribbled down into the edges of the box's platform. Smoke and vaporized insulation seeped upwards. The platform juddered and leapt as a series of short circuits occurred in its workings, sparks rippling round it like St Elmo's fire.

As I made for the exit, I passed Johnny's adjuster, lying unprotected and apparently forgotten. I stooped to unplug its connections but they wouldn't budge. I knelt to gain a better purchase. Instant conduction through my suit where its knees touched the floor changed my mind. I tried to lug the machine, connections and all, off the floor. It remained immovable. I worked at the cables again, thwarted in my attempts to unscrew them by the suit's data gloves.

I took a quick look round. The remaining boxes had finally toppled, flashing into incandescence as they hit the hot metal floor. Fires were raging all around now and the

radiated heat had penetrated even the reflective rhodium coating of my suit. The floor heaved again and a river of molten aluminium began running towards me. I started for the door and in my haste, slipped, falling headlong in the path of the blazing metal.

I blinked to squeeze the sweat from my eyes and kept them shut, expecting to feel the momentary searing pain of thousand degree temperatures. When I re-opened them the ridge marking the advancing flow had slowed and come to rest.

I had no time to feel relief. My gaze had caught on the red digits of the suit clock display. I stared at them in amazement, oblivious to all else, willing the static numbers to change. I suddenly realized that, till that moment – (should that be *this* moment?) – I hadn't believed in the theory. Faced with its apparent proof, I knew I could not live with the knowledge.

The last thing I remember was thinking that Johnny had given me fire, again.

Hello. Is there anybody out there?

I have used the past tense. That troubles me. I'm not sure if Higgins – or any of the others for that matter – is dead. It might be me.

But I have no evidence to suggest that anyone remains alive. That's part of the problem. I've still to come to terms with how things work here, you see. I have no evidence for anything. I see nothing, feel nothing, hear nothing. There is only me, alone in the dark. I'm not even certain I still have a body. All I can do is think. But I'll work it out, in time.

Ah, yes. Time. You think you have experienced it? Seen it slip merrily past as you got on with your life? Racked up the years as you waited for its purpose to unfold? You may even have thought that time flows, and there might somehow be the possibility that it could be reversed, its arrow fly backwards, and your mistakes be mercifully expunged, your sins undone. That you would eat shit, taking sustenance in your arse; reconstitute food in your undigestive system, gurgitate it onto your plate. Be born from your grave, atoms coming together from putrescence to form healthy flesh. Approach your lovers limp and sweat covered, penetrate them with slippery, eel-like ease; emerge vibrant, hard and potent, having received from them the energy-giving seed. Progress through life, becoming strong, young and, finally innocent, helpless. Crawl back into your mother's womb to die.

An attractive prospect? A comforting end amid the sussurus of the blood that drains your life away? Better than the unknown fate in store in your real future?

I wish it could be so.

Learn from your mistakes, my friend. Time is not to be trifled with. Live to the full and take each moment as it comes. You may never have another.

Sometimes I think I must be dreaming, that I have fallen asleep on the job and will shortly wake up none the worse. Maybe there really was an accident at the lab, an equipment failure of some sort, and I have lapsed into a coma as the result. I can conjecture the frantic scurryings of Higgins and his colleagues as they rush to revive me and the others, the siren screamings of ambulances or fire appliances called to help, the swift oblivious journey to hospital. I can fondly



imagine vigils at my bedside, until I remember the red digits.

None of my imaginings has the quality of a dream, the inventive fantasies of the unconscious brain. I perceive the visions only vaguely. Nothing new penetrates my consciousness. All I have is memory.

Hindsight glosses perceptions, acting not so much as a filter for unwanted thoughts, more like a magnifying lens. As I reflect on the chain of chance which brought me here, each circumstance pounding on to the next like the neutrons propagating nuclear fission, certain incidents loom larger. In retrospect, the significance is enlarged, each event sharp in its detail.

If this is a fate worse than death, if I am to be stranded here indefinitely, perhaps it is fitting; I may have more than most to account for. My life has not been an unbroken succession of good works, I confess.

"Is this another of your strays, Higgins?"

Professor Stanley, "the Knife," a small, sharp-nosed, balding man, addicted to grey suits – not at all the imposing or eccentric model common to public perceptions of his title – was jointly in charge of Johnny's project. He sat behind a huge desk, framed by the window at his back. The air of authority that might evoke was, however, eroded by his small stature. Normally surprisingly self-effacing, having managed to rise to eminence with very little trace, there had to be some steel in him or he'd never have reached such heights, but to hear him speak at all sharply was unusual. He may have been irked by the fact that I was one of Johnny's helpers in a project going nowhere or maybe he was just in a bad mood. That this was our first encounter coloured my view of him from the beginning. It was a courtesy visit, turning out wrong.

"Mr Cassidy has agreed to help with the project, yes," Johnny said carefully.

"Do you know what you're getting yourself into, laddie?" Stanley asked me. His eyes were sharp, an alert brain behind them belying his languorous disposition, and there were at least two purposes to every question.

"I believe so, professor," I said. "Dr Higgins has explained the procedures thoroughly."

"Can't say it would appeal to me much," Stanley continued, "having my brain tinkered with, my experiences replayed for the dubious benefit of others; but then I'm a mere physicist, not a psychiatrist with a sideline. Don't you feel like a rat ready for dissection?"

"I wouldn't put it quite that way," objected Johnny.

"I'm more interested in what your prospective guinea-pig here thinks, Higgins," Stanley snapped, before returning his gaze to me. "Mr Cassidy?"

"The rat doesn't have a choice, professor, and receives no benefit. The treatment is intended to be therapeutic, and the rewards mutual. I have to come to terms with several things, you and Dr Higgins need people of a certain type. No pain, no gain, as they say."

"You're very sanguine about all this," he replied. "Are you sure you need such therapy?"

"Yes, professor."

He frowned and rummaged in his pockets, producing a pipe and some matches. Between attempts at lighting up he said, "You're aware it may not work?"

"Of course. But it's worth a try."

He moved over to an oak cabinet set against the wall. Johnny shifted in his chair. Lowering a dark, wooden leaf, Stanley revealed a selection of bottles of tempting shapes and sizes.

"May I offer either of you gentlemen a drink?" he said.

I controlled myself. "No thanks," I said. "I don't."

"Ah," said Stanley. "One of those. Well, I can see you might want to try something."

How to speak of this? It is only possible to describe it by analogy, but one which is inexact, and strained. At its margins the analogy breaks down. The description is coloured, fanciful; like physicists, with their strangeness and charm. So be it. I will describe it the only way I can, the way Higgins explained it to me.

Time *jumps*. It is not quite an ever-rolling stream, sweeping majestically by, impervious to influence. It is more like a raging torrent; a swirling, chaotic jumble, throwing itself

against the obstacles in its path, occasionally leaping into the darkness of a long, lingering cascade.

The flow is by no means smooth. Like the silent indirectly-observed ghosts that are sub-atomic particles, time comes in packets. It is a paradox, I know, but it is something grasped only when your attention has been elsewhere. Its chronons take you unawares, flitting past quickly while you concentrate, leaving you to wonder, when you surface, where the time has gone.

Such lost time cannot be recovered. The packets are absorbed, like the photons by which we appreciate light. When the moment is gone, it is irretrievable.

You may slow the flow down sometimes, or stem it for a while, slipping into the gaps between the chronons, holding yourself aloof, quiet and peaceful, perfect as the universe. But it never lasts, the chronons build up, pushing, pushing against you, and your resistance folds, the timeless moment slips away and, in a rush of noise and light and sensation too quick to grasp, the pent-up pressure floods through, the normal flow resumes.

As in the moment when the brakes lock, or your child falls towards a fire, when your mind instinctively throws up the barrier, hoping to avert disaster; and the chronons slow, stretched out like superstrings in infinitesimal space. But panic sets in, overthrows your desire for time to cease. The barrier is never solid enough. Your control fades, the lorry looms ever larger, the child falls further, avoiding your outstretched hands. The chronons slam in with brute force and a life or two is shattered, almost incidentally.

You'll forgive me, I hope, if my use of tenses remains a little off beam. I'm still not used to thinking my way round this. I flit between the past and the present with such ease I am no longer sure of the dividing line. For myself, I resolutely eschew the future: I can see no good in that direction.

The barman was gentle, but insistent. "Come on, son. You've had enough."

I tried to shrug him off but I was too far gone for my arms to make anything but weak flapping motions.

"No," I slurred. "I wanna drink."

"Don't you think it's about time you went home?" he said. "Not that your wife will thank you for it, the state you're in."

The words kindled anger in my befuddled brain. I began to shout. "What the Hell do you know about it, eh? D'you think that's funny or something? Look," I remonstrated. "Forget my wife. I have. Just give's a bloody drink."

"No," he said. "You've already had too much." He adopted a conciliatory tone. "It's nearly closing time anyway. Let's call you a taxi."

"No. I don't wanna go home." I tried explaining, my alcohol-soaked mind certain the argument was devastating. "I've nothing to go home for. My wife's left me, okay?" There was a moment's silence. "Okay?" I said into it. The barman wavered, "Well...", he said.

"It's all right," another voice interrupted. "I'll see to him."

"And who the fuck are you?" I asked, swinging round to confront the interloper. "And what's it to do with you, anyway?"

"Johnny Higgins," he said. "I'd like to talk to you. I've a proposition you might wish to consider."

Suspicion rose swiftly, "You're not a poof are you?" I asked with booze-induced directness.

He was tall, with blond, wavy hair cut just long enough so you'd notice. He had that repressed carriage, effeminate bearing and voice that some men have without being homosexual exactly, but they're not comfortable with women. There's certainly an element of sublimated sexuality about them. Johnny coped, I found, by immersing himself in his research.

And he was thorough. All his experiments were meticulously arranged and recorded, results promptly written up. He even left the lab tidy. He was the model of how scientists are supposed to work; the way very few of them do. He had to be. There were those, Professor Stanley among them, who thought his enterprise wasn't in the least scientific. Johnny's care and attention to detail was a pre-emptive strike. He'd give no-one the chance to accuse him of lax procedures.

A pained expression crossed his face. "No. I work at the university. I think you may be able to help me."

"Help you? How?"

"With a project I've got going."

"What sort of project?"

His reply was lost in the loud clanging of the closing-time bell, which set off unsympathetic resonances inside my head. The ritual incantation of, "Time gentlemen, please," added to the decibel count.

"Eh?" I said, still trying to recover.

"I can't explain it quickly. Why don't you come with me and we'll have a chat about it."

My suspicions hadn't subsided. "Have you some sort of I.D.?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure," he said. He produced a card laminated with his photograph and the university stamp. It looked genuine enough, but despite that I was still hesitant. Then he came up with the clinching argument.

"Come on," he said. "You can have a drink and we'll talk." I shrugged. "Why not," I said. "I'm not gonna get one here anyway."

I staggered out into the cool spring air. The change from the snug warmth made me hunch over. "Will it take long?" I



asked, rubbing my hands.

"No time at all," he said.

The barrier we throw up whenever we are not preoccupied, our resistance to the chronons, is a flimsy construct. We are all capable of erecting it, to a greater or lesser extent, but it is beyond conscious control. It is an intuitive function of the brain and subject to its vagaries. Sleep, for example, disables it entirely. But it is amenable to change, capable of enhancement, providing the thrust for Higgins's research.

His main angle of attack lay in the area of mind-altering drugs. Any that diluted the barrier's effectiveness would be worse than useless, hence the ban on alcohol. Recruiting sots might appear strange; but truly reformed drunkards are more likely to remain abstemious than those without the problem. Strict teetotallers were out for other reasons; Higgins wouldn't have the carrot of ameliorative treatment to hold over them. In addition, a lot of them have religious hang-ups, a potential difficulty Higgins wished to avoid. Believers are touchy over what they regard as God's prerogatives. But, then, to judge by my present plight they may have a point.

Higgins's search was for a drug that concentrated the effect, strengthened the individual's innate ability; and for the perfect scenario to provoke the response of time dilation.

He'd started with subjective assessments, anecdotes; but these are useless in a practical sense. Higgins wanted more rigour; monitoring; recording; above all, the Holy Grail of scientific endeavour, reproducibility. His temporal adjuster was built to bolster any effect, the whole clamjamphrie of Ames suits, metal-lined rooms and controlled drug trips designed to snatch the slightest shimmer of altered time out of the realm of fancy into hard fact, numbers, and the cold equations of impersonal respectability.

Time, time, time, see what's become of me. I have taken to composing epitaphs. Like this one: "Here is Cassidy, nailed to his cross."

The conceit is pointless – my epitaph will never be written, still less read – but such thoughts are a welcome distraction as my soul suffers the long day, even though religion has never been one of my strong points. I knew the terminology of course Resurrection, Hell, Purgatory, Reincarnation, Limbo – but I was a free-flowing agnostic, more inclined to seek solace out of a bottle than through prayer. But now, as I look around for my possibilities, I begin to see the attraction. I yearn for enlightenment, would receive gratefully any hint of a God who stands outwith the normal bounds of existence, eagerly await a *deus ex machina* to pluck me from my present state.

How long have I been here? The question is meaningless. How can time be marked when it has ceased to flow? I have slipped into a gap between the chronons, inhabit the space within an attosecond. I glide sideways through time, cursing the silver machine that sent me into this uncomfortable pause between life and... what?

I am reduced to clutching at straws, essaying futile gestures, vain attempts to communicate beyond my station. But if an effort of will created my present situation, why should another not also be my saviour?

Hello? If you can hear me, would you let me know?

Hello? Is there anyone at home?

Useless. It is as before. There is no response.

It seems I must be dead. The flashes before my eyes are endless re-runs of my life.

Was it proximity to the adjuster that made the difference? I was sprawled over the damned thing when It – whatever It was – happened. Is there a spacial factor involved that Higgins had failed to take into account? Am I hallucinating, the whole thing a febrile concoction due to rewiring of my synapses under the influence of Higgins's latest test drug?

There are other explanations. Perhaps the clock in my suit simply stopped, its power supply interrupted a few seconds before I "died." But why, then, did the display not blank out? I can see the glowing red digits still, haunting in their immobility.

Or maybe Higgins was in control all along, the whole thing a scenario he'd programmed into the virtualiser, a subtle evocation of a catastrophe to the lab, a double cross to fool us into thinking our ends had come, to give him the result he desired.

My mind circles the possibilities endlessly, and as endlessly evades a resolution.

Hello? Dear God. Can you help me? Please?

Sky an early shade of winter, moonless stars icy sharp. Leaves falling; red, yellow, brown. Bare trees black as claws against the lighter, starlit, blackness. A patch of snow on the ground. I stare upward, my exhaled breath condensing in huge clouds, warm alcohol glow bolstering my reluctance to go home.

So it starts again. For a while I was relatively untroubled; but now it seems Higgins's treatment has failed. Or has the shock of my predicament dislodged the mental block he helped construct?

I quail at the prospect. I do not want to go down that road once more, to experience anew those horridly familiar sights and sounds I fear I am powerless to prevent unrolling onto the screen of memory like a looped video. I strive to resist, to freeze the frame of the moment more solid than the ice beneath my remembered feet; but it is fruitless. The memory rolls on, my tread moves inexorably down the street (my brain a prisoner behind blue eyes) taking me on the trip I have rerun so often since that night that each rediscovered detail makes me shiver with apprehension and remorse.

But if, as it seems, I am unable to halt the recollection, why prolong the agony? I set the video of remembrance on fast forward; running over the same old ground at the double until, once again, I pause before the door.

The living room is warm, the glow of the gas fire – the sole utility not cut off – the only sight to cheer the gloom. She sits quietly, contemplating the flames, disgust on her face when she turns to acknowledge me. "You're drunk," she says. "How could you, Richard?"

"I had a bit of luck on the horses today," I say. "I was just celebrating."

"Celebrating!" (The accusation in her voice is a scalpel.) "When there are bills to pay and clothes to buy for the kids? Not to mention food! Richard, we can't go on like this."

(This is the watershed. If only I could do a retake, this would be the moment. From here, the cataract of time leads

downhill; with no means of return.

Damn you, Higgins. Without you I could have remained unaware that I might have prevented this, or at least slowed its progress. The stimulus to spark it to life may have been absent, and my drunkenness diluted its effect, but where was your machine when I needed it? Damn you for the knowledge of the degree of my culpability. Damn you: as I am damned.

I try to speak the words to make the change but a greater power than mine directs this action; the heavy weight of lost time bears down. The past is set in amber; available for view, but immutable.

I hear my voice say, "Oh shut up, woman. Stop nagging." (I cringe, now, at the harsh words.) "I've got precious few pleasures left in my life without you going on about them. Why don't you make me a cup of tea or something?"

"Make it yourself," she says, brushing past me. "I'm going to bed. And don't even think of coming to join me. You're a selfish bastard, Richard Cassidy. I wish I'd never met you."

(I had to piece all this together, you understand, from fragments conjured up piecemeal, at haphazard intervals. The details were at first hazy, the events recalled only dimly. But it became a polished performance, run through innumerable times. The cues this time were perfect, the joins seamless. I have slotted effortlessly into my former role. It would seem I can look forward to a long run.)

I stumble to the kitchen and fill the kettle clumsily. The gas is slow to light, the igniter's battery run down. The aura of flame as it catches singes the hair on my outstretched arm. The sickly odour of burnt protein drives me away. I forage for blankets and make up a bed in the spare room before the burble of the kettle intrudes. Its wailing subsides as I brusquely turn off the gas; the blue flame extinguishes with a petulant burping. I drag a bag from its box, splatter water carelessly onto the paper-clad leaves and return to the living room to wait broodily for the infusion to cool. Cheered by the drink, I switch off the fire (I do! The zero on the dial is lined up with the mark) and collapse into bed. The room revolves around me as I wait for sleep.

The blast wakes me, showering me with debris. Lath, plaster and ceiling joists cascade down. The air is thick with dust and screams, confusion and lack of oxygen. A fierce heat pervades the house, the heady reek of burnt gas. A strange flickering provides a dim illumination, the crackle of flames and creak of sagging timbers make themselves heard. A cold draught sets up around my legs. Above, a jagged area of starlight witnesses the wreckage. My fuddled brain struggles to comprehend the devastation.

I hear Martin screaming for help, the inarticulate, disturbed yells of his brother. Anna's voice cuts through the chaos, "Where are you?"

I fumble and grope my way over the debris through the changed landscape of the house. Grotesque shapes bar my path, unrecognizable lumps smouldering black, choking smoke. I know I don't have much time. The door to the hallway is in front of me. I try to open it but the explosion has knocked it out of true. I kick at it and it bursts free.

The stairs have disappeared; there is a void where the back wall should be. An irregular pyramid of brick, wood and slate occupies the rear of the house. The first floor terminates above me, swaying dangerously without its accustomed supports. Anna's head leans over the edge, her

body's weight spreadeagled behind her.

As she sees me she screams, "The boys, Richard! The boys!" I stare uselessly. "Where are they?" I ask.

"They're in that!" She points to the pyramid.

The flames have caught by now, the furnishings going up in a series of roars. The smoke and heat are barely penetrable. "Get back," I shout, between fits of coughing. "Get to a window and jump out. I'll do what I can."

I have had no chance to draw breath since my rude awakening, the events have rushed by relentlessly. I am caught up in the flow, carried along like jetsam into the bay of lost time.

I mount the pile, seeking a secure foothold, scabble across the scorching ruins, trying to locate the source of the cries. The detritus shifts and slides beneath my feet and I am forced to move more slowly. I can hardly see, smoke irritates my eyes and lungs. Oxygen lack adds to the bemusement of my alcohol-soaked brain. The boys' screams are interspersed with the roars and crackles of inferno. The pile heaves, tilts. I see the end of Martin's bed upturned, grab it and strain, hoping to find him underneath. It gives and the wall behind collapses, sending a stream of wreckage into the unbolstered gap. Martin's shouts collapse with it.

As if in sympathy, Robert's screams grow louder and I have no time to register I may have killed my first born. I scan the shattered remains desperately, seeking signs of Robert's cot. The fire is nearer now, the heat intense. Through a gap in the pile I spy a familiar shape rendered grotesque by its setting, awful in the infernal light. The cot's sides are bowed, laden down by an accumulation of wreckage. I enlarge the hole and push my head through.

His hands clench and curl, his body arches, screams of incomprehension and fear ragged now. The cot is pinned securely by the overlying rubble and I am helpless: my fuddled mind can erect no barrier to hold back the fire. I can only watch as his moments ebb away.

The flames lap nearer, begin to brush his fingers. I turn away in despair: running. (But I have found no refuge.)

If you can hear me, you know it all, now. As much as me, at any rate. So maybe you can judge.

Is this Limbo? A perverse Hell, suitable reward for my sins? Am I really dead? Was the lab destroyed, or was Higgins's quest fulfilled, his final programme a success beyond his most extravagant hopes, with this stasis the end result? Has the whole world stopped or just me?

I can answer none of these questions. I know only the present bounds of my existence. I remain here, hanging on the cusp of past and future, taking trips around the bay of lost time. Waiting for God to emerge from His machine.

There is only one option. I must simply come to terms with how things work here.

Just give me time.

Jack Deighton (alias the Dr Jack D. Stephen of our letter columns) makes his *Interzone* debut with the above story, though he is known to readers of David Garnett's *New Worlds* anthologies for previous sf tales. He lives in Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland.

Dead Can Dance

No one applies the cultural logic of late capitalism to SF with as much gusto as Ian McDonald. While commercial SF is content to tell the same story over and over (see below), and some of the best contemporary SF is engaged in refurbishing one or another of its ancestral templates (the dying Earth of Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun*, or the space opera paradiddles of Simmons's *Hyperion*), McDonald ransacks not only the entire treasure store of old sf images and tropes, but also the whole range of popular culture, from movies through TV, pulp fiction to pop songs. His rich prose conveys the strangeness of the future with a thrilling urgency and carries a dense freight of echoes, allusions and borrowings – sometimes so dense that the structure beneath is hard to glimpse. This textural overload can obscure the fact that, unusually in sf, McDonald's fictions are rooted in a conviction in the rights of ordinary people to live out their lives as they wish. His characters must struggle, not to gain power (or even to back onto a throne by mistake), but for survival against the disinheritance forces of totalitarianism and the schemes of those corrupted by power. Their voices are the voices of everyman, singing to be heard over the whirlwind of history.

In *Necroville* (Gollancz, £15.99), the dead (and we all are ultimately disinherited by death), live again through the magic of nanotechnology, which here drives the multistranded plot as the magic of biotechnology drove the plot of *Hearts, Hands and Voices*. And it is magic. McDonald is not one to clutter his fiction with handwaving explanations of a new technology, but instead prefers to explore the raw excitement of extrapolating its consequences. He wants to get down and party in the carnival of the future.

The dead, then, are infected with myriads of tiny machines which have given them immortality. Although death becomes them – the nature of their resurrection gives them rebuilt, much-improved bodies – they are contracted into a kind of serfdom to the corporation which controls entry into life after death. *Necroville* is the story of the revolution of the dead against their living masters. It is told over a single day and night in an hispanicized Los Angeles where the dead now occupy the ghettos, the necrovilles of the title. The revolution is led from on high, by the dead who have taken the high ground of space and who now threaten the Earth.

McDonald's template is not so much Silverberg's *Born With the Dead* as the movie *Bladerunner*. His dead are not elegant sybarites, but rebellious working stiffs,

Paul J. McAuley

replicants (quite literally: they have been rebuilt molecule by molecule, and at intervals must renew themselves by breaking down into a kind of soup) seeking to free themselves from the ruthless exploitation to which they are subjected. The Deckard figure is a streetwise lawyer, YoYo Mok, kind of like *Neuromancer's* Molly with subpoenas instead of razorblades under her fingernails. YoYo is McDonald's everyper-

the family that controls the corporation that controls the afterlife. It is a bravura performance that holds itself together by sheer momentum. As long as things keep happening – and a lot of things keep on happening for most of the novel – the unlikely conjugation of coincidental plots are kept from flying apart by centrifugal force. That's not to say the resolution doesn't neatly tie up the considerable number of loose ends; despite the intense flak of borrowed images, quotes and hip references, McDonald brings the various plot strands together with skill. But there's a suspicion that he sometimes deploys his cutups and verbal fireworks not

because he needs to but because he can: he's not doing it for his readers, but for himself, and the resulting chorus of echoes and echoes of echoes often drowns out his own voice. Indeed, the strongest and most satisfying sense of strangeness comes from those scenes set in the cold quietus of space, in which the revolt of the freedead and glimpses of an eternal, posthuman future are limned with concise precision. In space, you can hear McDonald dream.

In The Breath of Suspension

(Arkham House, \$20.95), Alexander Jablovkov delivers, with chilly affect, ten tales straight from the heart of mainstream American sf (all were first published in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, which currently has charge of that battered organ). In all of them, Jablovkov invests themes central to sf – intelligent cetaceans, time travel, alternative history, colonization of alien worlds – with a sumptuous sensual prose, and a particular, dark intelligence. The stories are driven by the art of bluff and doublecross, and bleed with the agonies of self-deception. This is particularly



evident in perhaps the best of a fine collection, "A Deeper Sea" (from which his novel *A Deeper Sea* was derived), in which the man who established communication between cetaceans and humans must bear the guilt over the ways in which whales and dolphins, who are not exactly the playful innocents of most other sf portrayals, are subsequently exploited. Even the slapstick of the lighter stories – such as the impeccably wry chases through history both real ("Many Mansions") and imagined ("At the CrossTime Jaunters' Ball") convey the sting of genuine pain.

Like Lucius Shepard, Jablovkov is not an

son, caught up not only in the revolution of the dead, but also in the schemes of an omnipotent Artificial Intelligence born in the data web, freedead assassins who wear the faces of the living, and the consequences of the back histories of five people who are attempting to meet in the Terminal Cafe, in Necroville, in the middle of the festival of the Day of the Dead.

McDonald's future LA is hectic and crowded and colourful, a carnival set through which he drives a multi-stranded plot which centres on, and is resolved by, skeleton-in-the-cupboard revelations about

innovator in the sense that he introduces new devices or metaphors wrought from the cutting edges of science, but there's a fine shrewdness to the twists he wrings from his plots, and he brings a literary concern to sf motifs that's refreshingly free of sentiment. In the past few years, Arkham House has been reliably delivering a series of short story collections that showcase both established and burgeoning talents. *The Breath of Suspension* is graced with a particularly fine J.K. Potter cover and interior illustrations and it is printed on acid-free paper with a strong binding. Jablovsk's stories deserve their setting.

Adam Lively's fourth novel (which is not to be confused with Ray Bradbury's collection of short stories, *I Sing the Body Electric*, or Colin Harrison's recently published corporate thriller *Body Electric*, which also draw on the same line of Whitman's), *Sing the Body Electric* (Vintage, £5.99) may be set in the future, but it looks back to the past. It is a novel about the estranging, double-edged gift of artistic creativity and the role of art in society, the art here being music – the novel's five movements mirror those of the symphony which at its beginning its hero, Paul Clearwater, is trying to write.

It is some time in the 21st century, in an unnamed country somewhere in Europe. Paul Clearwater has retreated from the hedonism of New Venice, a city built to symbolize the new Millennium, to the coastal town of Wellfleet, a kind of heritage park which recreates the ambience of the 19th century. The first section consists of Clearwater's letters home, in which, in a finely judged piece of ventriloquism, Clearwater reveals himself to be pompous, well-meaning and naive. Eager to perform his newly completed *Sea Symphony*, he is swindled by a local businessman and must flee his debtors and a failed love affair. Returning to New Venice to mount an opera that will pay off his debt, he is both attracted and repelled by a new invention, the neurorch, which can turn thoughts into music, to powerful and potentially harmful effect. Clearwater is fatally seduced, eventually trapping both himself and his Wellfleet patrons.

The future is another country whose maps are a matter of intense debate within the sf genre. Rather than reinvent it from scratch, Lively cleverly avoids having to evoke the future which contains the neurorch by setting much of the novel in the cultural museum of Wellfleet, and casting the two sections set in New Venice in the form of a letter to Paul from his sister, and as an opera libretto. This technically skilful ledgermain does leave a structural caesura in the novel's midsection; Clearwater's seduction by the neurorch is barely glimpsed through the veils of Lively's evasions. Nor is the theme of the tortured artist exactly new – and Paul Clearwater is no Stephen Dædalus. But Lively's dramatization of the human cost of artistic creativity is enlivened by salt-sharp comedy; and if his theme is not new, the metaphor of the neurorch externalises it to powerful effect. It is notoriously difficult to write about music and

musicians; Lively does so with energy and a sympathetic gusto. *Sing the Body Electric* is a finely tuned performance, and orchestrates its ideas with admirable control.

For someone with impeccable hard-sf credentials (Bova was an aerospace engineer, the editor who took over *Astounding SF* after John W. Campbell had transformed it into *Analog*, and his last novel, *Mars*, was nothing if not thoroughly researched), Ben Bova's new novel, *Death Dream* (New English Library, £5.99) exhibits a curious reticence when it comes down to describing the nuts and bolts of virtual reality. There's some description of the hardware, to be sure, but the actual deployment of the programming and processing power that drive the images, and the psychology of virtual reality itself, are scantily drawn at best.

Given that the hero and one of the villains are both computer programmers, this leaves the novel with a rather hollow core, around which is wrapped a routine melodrama in which the average guy hero must defend his family against a paedophile and an asocial geek genius with delusions of grandeur. Unusually for Bova, virtual-reality technology is shown in a dark light: the geek uses it to dispatch people who cross him; the paedophile uses it to seduce his potential victim. And because Bova fails to set limits on the effects of the illusions of virtual reality on human perception, in the end reality and computer generated scenes become hopelessly confused. It becomes all too much, well, like a dream.

With fatal honesty, Jenny Wurts confesses in a brief foreword to her collection of short stories, *That Way Lies Camelot* (Harper Collins, £15.99), that short fiction isn't her natural venue. From the evidence it's hard to disagree. A series in which a snooty space navy officer tries to outwit a crafty, omnipotent pirate has a certain crude vigour, if only in the way in which bystanders are casually dispatched, but the stories could have been written any time in the past 50 years. Most of the rest are pure fantasy, and most are fatally infected with sentiment or whimsy. However, the world-shaking magical duel in "The Snare" is told with a swift economy that evokes the fiercest Norse myths, and in "Dreambridge," perhaps the best story here, there's a genuine yearning, a genuine sense of imminent loss, when the last intersection between this world and the world of faerie is threatened. It is also the story on which the cover illustration, which Wurts painted, is based.

But too many of the stories collected here are furnished with tropes worn smooth by too much handling. In this they reflect their origins: most are pieces originally knocked out for various shared world or theme anthologies which, ostrich-like, root their heads in the comfortable, familiar themes of the pulps of the 1940s. The recent proliferation of these anthologies exposes the contradiction at the heart of so-called traditional sf – in a genre whose central concern is that of change, familiarity breeds content. **Paul McAuley**

IN THE MARGINS

Brian Stableford

When science fiction was still largely confined to the magazines it was frequently argued that the genre was uniquely well-suited to the short-story format, often on the grounds that that the true "hero" of a science-fiction story was the central idea displayed therein. Nowadays, however, the logic of the marketplace dictates that the primary form of any popular genre is the novel or the novel series, the longer the better.

One of the side-effects of this evolution has been a drastic change in the role played in sf by the ideas and inventions which define it; these now supply the decor against which "character-driven" plots are set rather than the turning-points of *contes cruels* and *contes philosophiques*. The magazines still provide a comfortable home for short fiction, but relatively little of that material is reprinted in more permanent form, and the resultant books exist in the margins of the field. Only a handful of sf authors carry sufficient clout with mass-market publishers to have short story collections issued regularly, but small presses grateful for the opportunity to pick up quality material without significant competition are beginning to colonize the market space left derelict by their rivals.

David Brin's second collection, *Otherness* (Orbit, £16.99) offers 13 stories along with assorted notes and essays derived from the argumentative talks which the author delights in delivering to audiences at conventions (or wherever else he can find them). Brin is a fervently iconoclastic writer of the old Campbellian school who loves to pick up a really neat new idea and take it all the way to the logical limit. His best stories surge forward with tremendous energy, each one avid to find some extrapolated consequence of its premise which will startle and challenge the reader. Brin is blithely unafraid of causing offence to entrenched prejudices, because he knows full well that all progress depends on the willingness of unreasonable men to put forward bold new hypotheses for scrupulous examination. His tone ranges from the scathingly sarcastic, as in "The Giving Plague" through the monstrously satiric, as in "Dr Pak's Preschool," the perversely paradoxical, as in the essay "The Dogma of Otherness," and the whimsically comic, as in "Shhh..." and "Those Eyes" to the unashamedly awestruck, as in "What Continues..." and "What Falls."

The Coming of Vertumnus (Gollancz, £15.99) is, by my count, Ian Watson's eighth collection – an astonishing count in today's hostile world, and eloquent testimony to the fact that he is one of the most inventive writers working in the field. No one writes more vividly exotic tales of alien contact

than he does and no one is more assiduous in producing images transcendent metamorphosis; "The Odour of Cocktail Cigarettes" and "Nanoware Time" fit into both categories, while further examples of the latter tendency – in a darker vein than once was usual in his work – are "The Coming of Vertumnus" and "Looking Down on You." The collection also features one very striking horror story, "The Bible in Blood", and half a dozen stylish finger-exercises in determined quirkiness.

Steve Aylett's debut collection **The Crime Studio** (Serif, £7.99) employs a parsimonious measure of science-fictional imagery but it lies in what some critics like to call the "slipstream" of ultra-modern popular culture. It offers a series of grotesque and conscientiously amoral quasi-Runyonesque vignettes describing life in the mean streets of Beerlight. The stories live or die on their wordplay, and although the occasional turn of phrase does fall flat there are more than enough which slap you in the face and run away laughing to make this a very funny and eminently readable volume.

Gwyneth Jones has never been a prolific short story writer, and it is therefore no surprise to find that **Identifying the Object** (Swan Press, \$3.75) is a relatively slim volume, although it is more than bulky enough to challenge the competence of the staples which are supposed to hold it together. Three of the four stories it contains seem to be "spinoff" from Jones's last three novels, exploring other facets or alternative versions of characters featured therein. As with all her work, the stories are intense inspections of the actions and reactions of people under extraordinary stress in exotic situations; those readers who can relate to this *modus operandi* and the particular ends to which it is typically employed will find little else to compare with these stories, but I confess that I find it difficult so to do.

Taken as a group, these four collections lend considerable credence to the notion that there are kinds of science fiction which can only flourish in short stories. Even Watson's "Nanoware Time," the longest story in any of the books, could not comfortably be expanded any further. The fact that some sf stories use ideas as "heroes" (as Watson often does and Brin almost always does) is only one factor to be taken into account. In Aylett's stories the true "hero" is the narrative voice – not merely its mannerisms, entertaining though they are, but also its eccentrically perverse moral standpoint. In Jones's work the characters are, indeed, at the very epicentre of the narrative – just as they tend to be in mundane forms of literary fiction – but their experience of life is transfigured and tormented by the exotic environments in which they move, so that the stories become delicately and self-sufficiently surreal. The majority of the reading public, even in that sector defined by an interest in sf, seem to like short stories far less than long or interminable ones, but it would be a great pity if the margins of the field were to become too narrow to contain books like these.

Brian Stableford

YEOVIL PULLS IT OFF AGAIN

Neil Jones

Several years back, a string of books appeared under the Games Workshop publishing banner, set in various of their game worlds. One of these worlds was "Dark Future," an alternate world where gang-cults fought it out, *Mad Max*-style in a United States that was largely rocks and sand. From this initially unpromising base, Jack Yeovil (aka Kim Newman) created a richly-detailed alternate future, and some hugely entertaining books – *Demon Download*, *Krokodil Tears* and *Comeback Tour* (the one that features an alternate Elvis). Sadly, GW dropped out of publishing and these (take my word for it) terrific books dropped from the shelves – until just recently, when the GW book line made a comeback

under Boxtree's wing with many of those earlier titles reissued (if you didn't read those Yeovil titles before, or his superb fantasies, *Drachenfels*, *Beasts in Velvet* and *Genevieve Undead*, then don't miss the chance now). Enterprisingly, Boxtree persuaded Newman/Yeovil to expand the short story he wrote to lead off the Dark Future series, "Route 666" (which originally appeared in the anthology of that title), and so now there is **Route 666** the novel (Boxtree, £3.99).

In this alternate world, Kennedy lost to Nixon. Thereafter, eco-catastrophe came early and comprehensively, rock music died and Elvis became a Sanctioned Op, while technology slid effortlessly into cyberpunk. Here it was Russia that fought in Vietnam, and paid the social price, before finally nuking it out with China. On TV Dr Nick exhorts you to smoke as much as you can for your health's sake; while amongst the alternate films is *The Sound of Music* starring Marilyn Monroe.

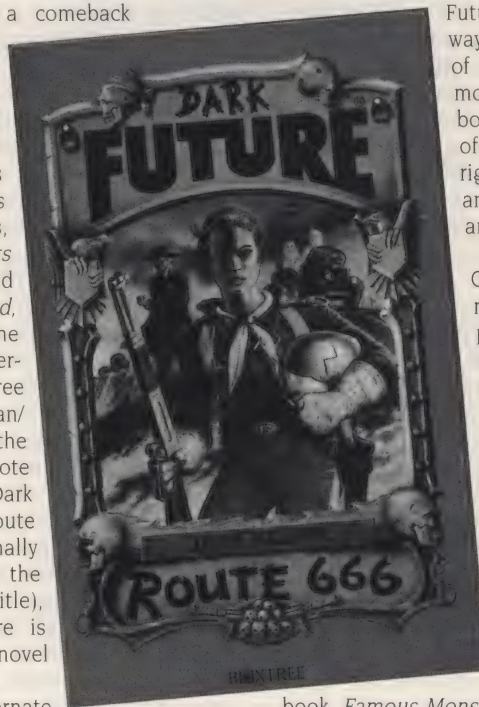
The series centres on a fiendish plot against the human race by Lovecraftian demons and their acolytes, especially the sinister Nguyen Seth who wears a pair of otherworldly shades. The opening section, set in the previous century, features Edgar Allan Poe and a mysterious cowboy. Then we fast-forward into the alternate 90s, with

the US Cav, a private law-enforcement group, who cruise the desert in high-tech vehicles; plus various gonzo gang-cults such as the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Knock 'Em Sock 'Em Robots; the *numero uno* Sanctioned Op, Redd Harvest; and the streetwise Jessamyn Bonney, destined to become one of Nguyen Seth's great foes, but here just starting out. Elder Seth is leading his unarmed flock across the desert to their Promised Land in Utah, and there's going to be an enormous amount of blood along the road – which is just what Elder Seth ordered.

Yeovil has done a smooth job of expansion here, deepening the conflict and the characterization, and taking the opportunity to parade even more of his engagingly nightmare world. Smooth, too, the way he's been able to return to a scenario he last wrote about several years ago so that you can't see the joins. Besides making you (if you haven't already) reread Yeovil's other Dark Future titles straight through, this book also raises hopes of Newman's turning in the planned final volume in the sequence, *US Calvary* – but not before further filling out his Dark Future books along the way. (If he's got time for it of course, in between more of his fantasy books). Buy lots of copies of this one to send the right signals to Boxtree, and then just sit back and enjoy.

One book at a time is never enough for the prolific Newman, so there's also **The Original Dr Shade and Other Stories** (Pocket Books, £4.99), out under his own name this time, a collection that pulls together many of his short stories from various sources – although there are still enough left over to make up a second

book, *Famous Monsters*, due out next year. Lots of these stories will already be familiar to long-time *Interzone* readers: there's the title story, which shows us the dark forces rising behind a revival of a 30s comic-book character in an ultra-right Britain, and is itself almost worth the price of the book; its sort of-sequel, with Roy of Super Queens Park Rovers, "SPQR"; his first professional sale, "Dreamers"; the nicely-judged horror tale, "The Next-But-One Man"; "Gargantabots Versus the Nice Mice"; "Twitch Technicolour"; and the cyberpunk nightmare "Patricia's Profession," with its companion piece from elsewhere, "Pamela's Pursuit." Several of the stories here feature private detective Sally Rhodes, including the recent "Organ Donors," which brings Sally up against Newman's media tycoon baddie from the Dr Shade story, Derek Leech.



There's science fiction, there's horror, there's even some very un-Tolkienesque fantasy, but it doesn't all come in neat packages because that's not Kim Newman's game — which is about blurring those distinctions, and stirring in cinema, TV, politics, in fact just about anything to hand, to create a unique form of synergy all of his own. Some very strong stories, a major collection.

Roger Zelazny's most recent novel, **A Night in the Lonesome October** (Orbit, £4.99), is a fantasy and a return to his better form, especially after the routine work he has turned out in the most recent batch of Amber books. The narrator-protagonist is Snuff, an intelligent dog, whose master is called Jack and has a mysterious mission involving knives and night and London fogs. Besides Jack, there are a number of immediately recognizable characters, such as a vampire count, a very great detective, a werewolf, a witch, and a mad scientist given to stitching used body-parts together. But they remain on the periphery of the narrative.

Centre-stage, at least as seen from Snuff's viewpoint, are their familiars: the witch's cat, Graymalk; a snake; an owl; a squirrel who has lost his shadow; an albino raven; and a rat. Their various masters are all players in a mysterious and sinister game, and are on one of two sides. The game runs for the entire month of October: there's a countdown of sorts as the month progresses — and an uneasy truce in operation as final preparations are made — until allegiances are gradually revealed and the finale occurs on the last day of October. Imagine mixing up a whole string of Hammer horror films and then telling them all from a dog's point-of-view. Although this still can't come up to the rich work from the earliest phase of Zelazny's career, it's smoothly handled, charming, and a whole lot of fun. —Oh yes, the book also comes with illustrations from Gahan Wilson. Fine, but here, thankfully, the book's the thing.

The Nitpicker's Guide for Next Generation Trekkers by Phil Farrand (Titan, £7.99) is pretty much what it says it is: to quote the cover blurb, "six seasons of Bloopers, Flubs, Technical Screw-ups and Plot Discrepancies for Discriminating Fans of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*." For the true-blue admirers of *Star Trek: TNG* out there (now come clean, how many does Interzone have, besides me?) it's worth saying that this is no hatchet job: it's clearly a labour of love, written by a true fan for dittos. Which means, of course, that if you're not even

remotely enamoured of *ST:TNG* then you should read no further? — Well no, because even you might be curious as to why anyone would put in the enormous amount of time, effort and sheer dedication that Farrand obviously has.

He covers six seasons worth of *Star Trek* here, and that's a lot of episodes, all with their plot summary and then the mistakes — which are legion, plus trivia questions, and quotes from the show. And what sort of mistakes do you get? Well, quoting from Farrand's personal favourites, there's the episode where Riker asks the computer

the way to the holodeck, it tells him it's the next door on the right, then Riker turns left and enters the holodeck. In print it may not look much, but *ST:TNG* is a TV series, after all, with legions of people working on it — how come no one, until Farrand, noticed? (Or did you? Only you never got around to writing a book about it.) Still, it's a get-it-done-by-the-deadline world. How would any TV series fare under this sort of searchlight?

In the end, of course, this is a book that is only going to be bought by the true-blue-Trekkers out there — but may be enjoyed by those who put *ST:TNG* to scorn. When Editor Pringle handed me this book to review at the Brighton Friday-night sf gathering, it was promptly intercepted. There were sturdy denials, such as: "I am not now nor have I ever been a Trekkie," but nobody was willing to give up the *Nitpicker's Guide* just yet, thank you — I finally got hold of it well after chucking-out time.

Not so much fun is **The Trek Index** by Thomas Maxwell (Boxtree, £9.99). There are five categories — Planets and Places, Aliens, Characters, Spaceships, as well as a catch-all-the-rest: Artifacts, Plants, Plagues, etc. Lots of Trek info: for example, Oo-Mox. Do you really want to know what it is? No, under normal circumstances you almost certainly wouldn't. But, since you insist — it's a Ferengi erogenous zone, on their ears, as a matter of fact. Who are the Ferengi? Fear not, the book will tell you.

The trouble is, tucked away in the individual episodes, stuff like this is all fairly innocuous; but sieved out of the programmes, much of it is shown up as plain silly, no doubt force-produced due to the voracious demands of a weekly series. This one's for completist *Trek*-spotters only.

Neil Jones

Editor's note: The above review was written before Neil Jones's recent appointment as a part-time editorial adviser to Boxtree Ltd.

SPLISH SPLASH!

Peter Crowther

Yep, just when you thought it really was safe to get back in the water along comes Peter "Jaws" Benchley with yet another good reason to stay on dry land.

Formularization and archetypes abound in **White Shark** (Hutchinson, £14.99), an everyday tale of Nazi genetic engineering gone awry and the end-result being left to fester in an ocean trench for 50 years before being brought to the surface to menace a small New England community. All the regulars are there: (Simon) Chase, the recently divorced but thoroughly-decent thinking-woman's macho man; Tall Man (Palmer), the Native American sidekick; Max, the healthily confused but very willing-to-listen 12-year-old son who's staying with Pops for the summer; Elizabeth, the deaf 12-year old girl who takes a shine to Max; and Amanda, the ruggedly beautiful female researcher.

Bit parts are played by the disgruntled drunken fisherman with a grudge against the hero; the bossy but thick chief of police who's more concerned with the forthcoming town celebrations than with trying to warn folks there's something less-than-playful swimming around the local waters; lots of walk-ons who virtually carry an *I'm going to die in the next scene* notice around their necks; plus several very cute and supposedly hyper-intelligent porpoises, sea lions and other amphibious creatures.

The action takes place initially around the small Connecticut town of Waterboro and latterly right inside it. It involves a steadily increasing body-count, a monster that's a cross between Ted Sturgeon's "It" and James Arness as the *Vegetable From Another World*, lots of fascinating statistics, two burgeoning love stories, excellent (if slightly stereotypical) characterizations, a small-town Americana setting that's straight out of a 1955 B&W 'B' movie, and a perfectly realized ending. Read the book and then cast the movie — *Fantasy Hollywood...* it'll be the next big thing!

All that said, I read *White Shark* in one night and I defy most people not to do the same. It's nicely written, seemingly well-researched (who can tell!), and paced like a prize-winning marathon runner. Right from the start, you know who'll make it and who won't but getting there is just an absolute joy. Completely and unreservedly recommended but unlikely to get onto the Booker shortlist.

It's been a good month.

Christopher Fowler's **Spanky** (Warner, £6.99) is at once his most ambitious and his most straightforward book, a cross between a Thorne Smith pseudo-erotic/pseudo-comedic *Topper* yarn or John D. MacDonald's timeless *what if?* epic, *The Girl, the*



Gold Watch and Everything, and a possession-cum-haunting saga of Faustian proportions. That may seem like a tough marriage to keep working long enough to make it out of the church but Fowler cleverly splits the book into two almost distinct halves. The result is a resounding success.

Martyn Ross is one of life's little people, Wells's George McWhirter Fotheringay, perhaps, updated to the 1990s. He is an under-achiever of epic proportions, unlucky in love, estranged from his family and unfulfilled both in his work – in a furniture store that reeks of *Are You Being Served* – and at home, a modest flat he shares with a hippy burn-out called Zach. Into his life, one Tuesday night in a cellar club ringing to the sounds of techno-rave, steps Spanky, a daemon seemingly hell-bent on turning Martyn's life around.

The inevitable scepticism falls thick and fast... until Spanky demonstrates he really is what he professes to be. And he convinces Martyn to accept his offer of help. No strings attached.

With the apparently invisible Spanky constantly by his side, the following days and weeks for Martyn are ablaze with conquests, progressions and promotions. Women fall at his feet, colleagues are passed by in the pursuit of power, and his misfit family – gargantuan chocaholic sister, misfit mother still reeling from the death of Martyn's brother, and terse philandering father – are skilfully 'persuaded' to mend their ways. With the single exception of an incident in which Martyn's co-worker has his eye damaged in a squash game, there seems little harm in whatever it is that Spanky is actually doing. Martyn accepts it all, increasingly gratefully: the women, the clothes, the style, the promotions, the apartment, the car and the money. His gratitude is so great that, on occasion, Martyn's self-perceived debt to his volunteer helper reaches seeming adulatory levels. Particularly when Spanky announces that he's leaving. His job is done. Martyn is on his own.

But not for long.

The daemon returns, bearing not gifts but rather an invoice... for services rendered. Did Martyn really believe that one could get so much for nothing? Had he not heard that there really is no such thing as a free lunch? A depressing turn of events to be sure – not least because it so effectively marks a failure in character-judgement on Martyn's part – but, as the old saying goes, one can always get out of it by paying. That is, until one learns just what the price entails. When Martyn refuses to pay up, the hitherto charming and even amusing Spanky displays his true colours... and they're all black. The daemon *will* be paid, he assures the hapless Martyn. Sooner or later. The only difference is that the latter will involve a lot of pain and distress... and not just for Martyn.

For now, in Runyonesque parlance, Spanky knows his mark. He understands him and his attitudes, recognizes his soft spots and his weaknesses. And, quite simply, he will take Martyn's world down around his ears, slowly, until the deed is done.

Spanky really is a rarity within this often unfairly maligned genre because it tackles an age-old theme with such exhilarating freshness and modernity. Fowler's first-person prose sparkles with invention and wit – particularly in the ground-setting first half of the book – and then sinks into teeth-grinding paranoia as the protagonist must try every trick in the book to beat his adversary. But how do you do that when your adversary can read your mind, can travel anywhere in the blink of an eye, and, just like the Fedora-topped Lamont Cranston, can cloud men's minds to make them believe anything he wants about anything at all? It's a tall order but Fowler delivers it spicy-hot, fresh and immensely enjoyable. And, unlike so many literary meals, the final morsels on the plate leave you replete and entirely satisfied. One for the re-read pile.

To include Will Eisner in a book of "Conversations with the Creators of the New Comics" is both audacious and astute, and authors Stanley Wiater and Stephen R. Bissette are to be congratulated on doing just that with their excellent **Comic Book Rebels** (Donald I. Fine, \$25), which includes – indeed, *culminates in* – a telling interview with the man who single-handedly brought about the current vogue of The Graphic Novel.

For those not in the know, Eisner is the creator of *The Spirit*, a masked do-gooder who operated in fictional Central City during the 1940s and 50s. The character has enjoyed numerous reprints, the latest (and so far best) being Denis Kitchen's full run of the wonderful *Spirit* newspaper sections, running the full gamut of all genres – horror, crime, suspense, comedy, science fiction and fantasy – with each episode steeped in an Americana that veers effortlessly from Norman Rockwell's small-town, picket-fence nostalgia to James M. Cain's and Jim Thompson's *noir* tales of big-city-backstreet skulduggery... and all points in-between.

But, with his ground-breaking *A Contract With God* (1978), he also pioneered the concept of the comicbook medium being used to detail life in modern-day America through an episodic style he was to continue into a whole series of illustrated novels. In this respect, Eisner is/was the grand-daddy rebel without whom it is surely at least debatable that the other gifted luminaries – including Alan Moore (*Swamp Thing*, *The Watchmen*), Neil Gaiman (*The Sandman*, *Miracleman*, *Violent Cases*) and Frank Miller (*Daredevil*, *The Dark Knight*) – featured here in telling conversation, would have succeeded to quite the same degree.

This is a book of history, expertly crafted and, despite its grounding in the comicbook field, touching on all facets of the sub-genres of fantastic story-telling. If you've never tried reading the so-called "funny pages," then this is the book to start you off on an odyssey that could – should – change your life. Recommended.

Rex Miller: The Complete Revelations (TAL, \$9.95), t. Winter-Damon's "exposé" chapbook on the popular American horror/crime writer, is a curious mixture – by

turns amusing, fascinating and annoying. The good news is that the latter is outweighed by the former two.

Miller – or Killer Miller, as Winter-Damon refers to him throughout – achieved 'fame' with a series of books about a gigantic serial-killer named Daniel Bunkowski whose huge size earns him the soubriquet Chaingang. Take note: these books are unlikely to be adapted for television.

The text of *The Complete Revelations* runs like a cross between Kerouac or Burroughs, Harlan Ellison at his most vitriolic, and one of those fast-talking American disc-jockeys that crop up on volumes of the *Cruising* record series, a stream-of-consciousness, breathlessly hyperbolic mixture of book reviews, interviews and extracts from Miller's work, with, occasionally, the style being allowed to overshadow the information. But it *is* amusing. In one of the interviews, for example, Miller recalls the selling of his first book thus: "They bought *Slob* for a couple of bags of Chicklets, a kiss, two collect calls and a promise 'not to come in my mouth.'" And we thought the recession was bad in *England*!

Like other examples of the "speculative fiction" anthology, Joy Oestreicher's and Richard Singer's **Air Fish** (Catseye Books, \$16.95) is pretty daunting if taken *en bloc* without breaking to touch reality once in a while. And, unlike, say, Chris Kenworthy's recent collections and Andy Cox's *Third Alternative* magazine, Oestreicher and Singer have gone almost to the limits in terms of *avante garde*, occasionally recalling even the excesses of Burroughs's early cut-and-paste approach to narrative progression. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't... but then that's true of anything. Check out Bruce Boston's epic poem "Alchemical Texts" and stories from Th. (sic) Metzger, Craig A. Strickland, Steve Rasnic Tem (with a *very* memorable short-short), John Shirley and Adam-Troy Castro for the high points.

Fans of faerie tales and Kipling's *Just so* stories would not be disappointed with **Miniature Magic and More Miniature Magic** (Fantasy Publications, no price given), two modest small-press collections written and published by Kelvin M. Knight. Mystical without being overly cute, Knight imbues the realm of 'high' fantasy with a pleasingly distinctive voice – and a third collection (*Mutational Magic*) is apparently forthcoming. Write to him for more details – not least the price! – at 3 Saint Ronan's Road, Southsea, Hampshire, PO4 0PN.

As usual, Ellen Datlow's and Terri Windling's **Year's Best Fantasy and Horror** (St. Martin's Press, \$26.95 hardcover or \$16.95 paperback) – now in its seventh year – is the anthology that should be on everyone's buy-list. With a 100-page summation of the past year to kick off the book, followed by 510 pages containing 54 stories and closing with a listing of a further 500-600 story recommendations, this latest edition maintains its own high standards and serves as a timely testament to editorial objectivity and consistency. Recommended.

Peter Crowther

SMALL-PRESS MAGAZINES

Paul Beardsley

Fasten your seatbelts, we're going round the world. First stop is London, home of **Black Tears**, a 56-page A5 horror zine now in its fourth issue. Dallas Goffin and Liam Kemp provide competent, though hardly inspiring, artwork, and Steve West provides articulate nonfiction. Stories range from William Meikle's "The Divine Wind," this issue's "slipstream" piece (which in this context means "twee"), to puerile fantasies about talking skeletons and women getting butchered, by the likes of F. G. Walker and Chris Fretwell (the latter mentions a door "just big enough to emit a man"). Even the presence of small-press biggie Paul Pinn fails to redeem this trash. *Black Tears* is available from Adam Bradley at 28 Treaty St., Islington, London N1 0SY, £1.75 per issue, £6.75 for four.

Next, we go North of the Border to sample the unknown pleasures of Edinburgh University and its sf society, whose magazine, though 11 years and 12 issues old, was not generally available until recently. **New Dawn Fades** has 36 flimsy A4 pages, plus a newsletter, *Incoming!*, for subscribers. Its student origins are cringingly obvious in places: there's the consistent misspelling of common words, the bad punctuation, the editor's inability to keep his hands off the bold and italic functions, the ghastly, insulting comic strips by John Miller... On the other hand, there's the first of a series of scholarly articles about Robert Louis Stevenson's fantasy stories, a William Gibson retrospective, and an appeal to reprint Barrington Bayley's novels.

The longest story, "Viral Programme," though reminiscent of *The Thing*, *Aliens* and *Solaris*, nevertheless avoids being derivative. Author Andrew J. Wilson is not afraid of including some convincing (and unobtrusive) science in what is probably the best truly science-fictional story I've read in the small press for a long time. Thomas Evans' "Straight Out of Left Field" starts as a clever ghost story with some nice ideas, but it doesn't go anywhere interesting. The rest of the fiction is tedious stuff about paranoia, pot-heads encountering UFOs, and people finding unexpected things in their sick. Curiously, I've read quite a few stories about the last of these in the small press recently. *New Dawn Fades* is available from paul f COCKBURN [sic], c/o 44 Clermiston Road North, Edinburgh, EH4 7BN. £2 per issue, £10 for four + *Incoming!*

Better things are happening in Ireland. **Albedo One** issue 4 has built on the strengths of issue 3, and the result is impressive. The illustrations generally aren't up to much, but Roberto Schima's montage

on the front cover is pleasing to the eye. All five stories are good. There's a subtle, humane quality about most of them, a sense (all too rare in the small press) that the authors really are using their imaginations and going beyond the obvious. David Murphy and Robert Neilson offer particularly fine performances.

The non-fiction is not bad either. As well as the usual letters, comments and book reviews, there's a lengthy Terry Pratchett interview by Robert Neilson (him again). All this, packed neatly into 64 A4 pages, makes for a compact, attractive publication. *Albedo One* is available from 2 Port Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland. (I still don't know the editor's name!) £1.75 per issue, £7 for four – easily worth the money, and the effort of digging out envelope, chequebook and stamp.

Things are different across the Atlantic. There's a quarterly horror magazine called **Deathrealm** on sale in the United States which, despite having a glossy colour cover, and featuring such big names as Karl Edward Wagner and Wayne Allen Sallee, calls itself a small-press publication. Leaving aside the obvious conclusion that our American cousins have more capital than us, there is nonetheless a lot that the British small press could learn from this magazine. For one thing, a horror story with a bit of characterization works rather better than one populated by mere perpetrators and victims. For another, stories become interesting when the author clearly knows what s/he's talking about, be it pot-holing, the American civil war, rock concerts or whatever.

I'm not a horror fan, but I was delighted by some of the stories in issue 21. In P. D. Cacek's "Tattoos" there's a blasé adolescent boy who knows everything about sex... but doesn't do too well when he has to talk to an actual woman. Jim Austin's "Blood Brothers," a tale of a rain-forest tribe, is a horror drama of the subtle kind – nothing impossible or even unlikely happens in it. Greg K. Puckett's "In Death's Eyes Weariness Weeps" is an interview with a reluctant, immortal and articulate serial killer whose crimes make the world a better place. The remaining four are equally good. These stories will probably appeal to fans of Ray Bradbury and Robert Aickman, among others.

In among the letters, reviews and interviews, there's a column called "Tentacles From Across The Atlantic," written by British correspondent D. F. Lewis. His name crops up a lot in overseas publications, as it happens – he's even bigger, and more popular, over there than here. An issue of *Deathrealm* can be obtained by sending US\$9 (payable to editor Mark Rainey) to Stanislaus Tal, PO Box 1837, Leesburg, VA 22075. Yes, it's

expensive, and a lot of hassle, but worth it in the long run. 66pp, approx A4.

On Spec: The Canadian Magazine of Speculative Writing is another good-looker. It is digestsized, printed on 98 pages of recycled paper. As the title suggests, the emphasis is on sf, with a tendency to experiment. The results are variable. Karin Lowachee and Wesley Herbert independently attempt to defibrillate cyberpunk tropes in their fiction, but neglect to include interesting storylines, or characters you can even slightly care about. Harold Cote's "The Project," the Summer '94 translation swap-over story from the French-language magazine *Solaris*, is a clever, acknowledged homage to Jorge Luis Borges; unfortunately it outstays its welcome. In "The Progressive Apparatus," Hugh A. D. Spencer writes prophetically about an author who has a Terminortype robot looking over his shoulder, ready to punish him if his work isn't politically correct. The three remaining stories are good reads – enjoyable, but not particularly speculative.

In addition to the fiction, there are three poems and a science question-and-answer column. There are no book reviews or readers' letters. A four-issue subscription costs US\$25, payable to On Spec, P.O. Box 4727, Edmonton, AB T6E 5G6, Canada. Worth a read, but not recommended as a market for non-Canadian writers.

A suborbital hop takes us to Australia, at a time when the continent's first-ever professional horror magazine, **Bloodsongs**, has just appeared. It's got good production values, an interview with Ramsey Campbell, and a load of other... stuff. The subscription blurb states, "Yer mum's sure to loathe it!" which sums up the intended readership. If yer a friendless git who gets turned on by gore, and thinks unaccompanied women deserve to be slashed, send yer money to Bambada Press, PO Box 7530, St Kilda Road, Melbourne, Victoria 3004. It's A\$10 per issue or A\$50 for six – sterling equivalent will do, but don't send cheques.

Moving into the future, we discover a new, internationally available magazine from *The Third Alternative* editor Andy Cox called **Zene**, subtitled "the magazine of magazines," it covers all aspects of all small press publications – their contents, requirements, frequency, level of courtesy and so on. Who knows, it might even result in higher standards of writing. One can hope. If you're interested, send cheques payable to *Zene*, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs. CB6 2LB. £1.95 per issue, £7 for four. It should be available by the time you read this.

Paul Beardsley

WOOFERS AND ONE-LINERS

Mat Coward

Raiders of the Lost Car Park (Doubleday, £14.99) is the second book in Robert Rankin's latest series, and the sequel to *The Book of Ultimate Truths*. It's more of the same – and that isn't a complaint, as any Rankin admirer will agree.

This time, tall teenager Cornelius Murphy ("the stuff of epics and so forth"), and his tiny sidekick Tuppe, discover that the notorious mage and philosopher Hugo Rune – the man who "taught the Dalai Lama to play darts" – intends to invade the Forbidden Zones and overthrow the secret rulers of the world. His plan involves kidnapping the Queen while she addresses the world during a rock concert. For reasons which are, unsurprisingly, to do with preventing the end of the world, Cornelius must defeat the mad schemes of both Rune and his opponents.

There's a slight sense of coasting, almost of being made up as it goes along, in this instalment, which is a selection of

daft characters and outrageous set pieces more than a proper narrative. Rankin, in any case, does not go in for the complex, carefully-plotted stories of Terry Pratchett, or Douglas Adams's joyfully relentless stream of invention. With this writer – certainly since his Brentford Trilogy – the books more or less stand or fall on the gags; and *Car Park* stands, erect as a guardsman on parade.

There's a wonderful meal scene, in which Mrs Murphy produces a ridiculously endless parade of dishes; the joke working because none of the characters remark on the impossibly cornucopian table, and even the reader needs to be alert to spot what's going on. Rankin delights in hiding some of his funniest moments amid his stage directions, concealing his woofiest woofers behind the scenery. Which is not to diminish his mastery of the unforgettable one-liner – "You have my moral support," the instinctively cowardly Tuppe tells bold Cornelius. "Use it as you think fit" – or his irresistibly unlikely catch-phrases: "The steps went down and down, the way some of them do."

Rankin also handles that mundane-intruding-into-the-fantastic trick, the basis of so much genre comedy, at least as well as anyone else around. His "big green thingy" – who is thinking of becoming a minicab driver because "I've got some bonus owing to me. And there has to be more to life than just being a big green thingy" – is as funny as it is daft, which isn't, of course, always the case with funny daftness.

He throws in bits of parody of all sorts of things, not just fantasy; and then, just to make sure you're paying attention, and to show that he doesn't in fact make it all up as

he goes along, he comes out with, for instance, a mathematical proof that the population of the world diminishes with each succeeding generation – one of those ideas that you know is absurd, but which you can't quite shake from your head once you've been incautious enough to let it in.

There is nothing, I'm sorry to say, which will stay in my head after reading Andrew Harman's second novel, **The Frogs of War** (Legend, £3.99), except the awful sense of doom I felt upon discovering that tired old line about military intelligence being a "mutually exclusive concept" – on page one!

The cover quotes a reviewer's opinion that Harman is "The nearest I've seen to a genuine rival [to Terry Pratchett]". And so he is, if only in the sense that his books (the first was *The Sorcerer's Appendix*; the third, *The Tome Tunnel*, is now out) are set in a thaumaturgic universe; that he employs spoof footnotes; and that his work is presumably aimed at an audience with such a hunger for wizard fun that it suffers cramps while waiting for Pratchett's next appearance.

The hero is a chap called Firkin, who becomes involved in resisting the world domination plans of one Snyderwinder, ex-

Lord Chancellor of Rhyngill, and discoverer of the ultimate weapon, *Rana militaria*, the dreaded frogs of war. I can only say that I found little amusing or interesting in this story, but that humour is, so they say, a personal thing; someone is buying Harman, and I don't suppose they'd do that unless they spotted something which I have missed.

No matter how wide the boundaries of science fiction are stretched, I don't really think they could be made to include **The Dork of Cork** (Abacus, £6.99) by Chet Raymo, although its author is a professor of physics and astronomy in Massachusetts, and its protagonist an astronomer. Even so, it may be of interest to the more science-minded sf fan (if such a person still exists these days) who happens to like mainstream literary fiction.

I don't happen to, and this well-written, generous-spirited novel is a good example of why I don't. It's a story which contains three stories: the successful book which the Dork – a dwarf (of the non-mythical type), whose intelligence and achievements fail to compensate him for his physical deprivations – has written; the story behind that story; and the main story, of how writing his book changes the Dork's life.

And yet, like most non-genre fiction, it doesn't really have a story at all, but a theme; in this case, a theme concerning the nature of beauty. There's no shortage of event, of wit, of character – but, for my money at least, the whole thing would have a lot more point if only it featured a couple of spaceships or a decent murder.

Mat Coward

HORROR PLOD

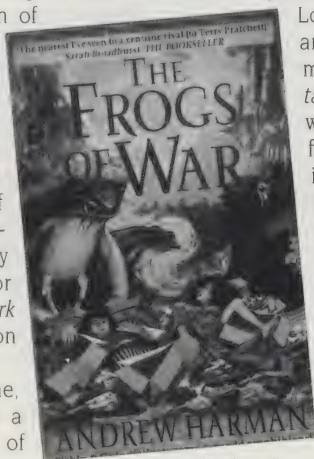
James Lovegrove

Joe Donnelly's **Shrike** (Century, £15.99) begins with a séance that accidentally unleashes a Terrible Evil on the unsuspecting Scottish town of Levenford. For sheer unoriginality, it would surely be impossible to top such an opening, but, to his credit, Donnelly tries.

His hero, Jack Fallon, is a cop emotionally paralysed by the deaths of his wife and daughter in a traffic accident. He also has a phobia that will prove something of a drawback when it comes to tackling the demon that is picking off the townsfolk one by one: he suffers from vertigo, and the creature likes high places. As if this were not enough, Donnelly handicaps Jack further. He makes him unbelievably stupid. Jack takes a very long time indeed to come to the conclusion that the bizarre and random murders are not being carried out by any human agency. Even with the help of a young librarian, Lorna, who for no obvious reason has developed a psychic rapport with the demon, Jack continues to maintain that a madman or a Satanic cult must be responsible, and plods along with his investigation while the bodies pile up around his ears and his Superintendent grows increasingly infuriated with the lack of progress on the case. Since we are being shown each murder twice, once as it happens and once more through Lorna's dreams, the whole process of hunting the villain is rendered doubly tedious. There is no mystery to be solved, as we know all along who is doing it, but neither is *Shrike* a police procedural novel – so what's the point?

Eventually one's irritation with Jack reaches such a pitch that when he is suspended from the investigation, one leaps from one's seat, crying, "At last! Now they'll draft in Inspector Morse or Carnacki the Ghost-Finder or someone who knows what they're doing, and then the whole thing will be wrapped up in no time and I can go to bed." No such luck. Jack is soon reinstated, and the novel grinds on for another couple of hundred pages. Finally, the beast is tracked down, not through dogged footwork but through coincidence. It is grappled with and defeated. End of story. Hurrah.

Not one flash of insight illuminates the 576 pages of *Shrike*. There is not one neat turn of phrase, not one gem-like aperçu, not the slightest glimmer of pathos or wit to leaven the proceedings. Donnelly, a journalist by profession, writes with no feel whatsoever for the English language. His prose is lumpen and lazy, incongruously combining high-flown grammar ("borne" for "carried"; "berated himself") with tabloid shorthand (the murders are said to have "rocked the town"). He believes that if you emphasize a word, any word, in italics, regardless of context it immediately becomes important. His efforts to build up a sense of community (as is *de rigueur* in such novels), to sketch a web of relationships back and forth across the town, are nothing short of perfunctory. The dialogue bears little resemblance to everyday



human speech, and in spite of Donnelly's habit of referring to characters by both first name and surname, it is hard to remember who is who or who does what for a living.

It is a relief, then, to move on to a novel that is not only original and genuinely unsettling but beautifully written. **Fishboy** (Hodder and Stoughton, £8.99), by Mark Richard, is an almost unclassifiable piece of fiction. Set in a future where an apocalypse seems to have taken place (but if it has, it is barely hinted at, and the reader is left to draw his own conclusions as to what actually happened), *Fishboy* tells the story of a boy, "a human-being boy, a boy who fled to the sea, a boy with a whistling lisp and the silken-tipped fingers of another class."

When we first encounter him, Fishboy seems strangely contented with his miserable lot in life, living in a "cartonated box" on a terminal beach somewhere, tending a feeble vegetable patch and surviving on scraps from a nearby fish-gutting factory. Then a trawler arrives, carrying (to quote *The Waterboys'* "Strange Boat") "the strangest crew that ever sinned", and when Fishboy accidentally kills the only person who has ever shown him any kindness, he decides to stow away on board, and joins the crew on their fruitless voyage across a nameless sea. Each man has a story to tell, a past crime to atone for, an obsession, a mania, and these gradually emerge as the ship rolls on beneath a swollen sun, beneath a torpid moon, until, just when it seems that there will be no end to the madness and the vio-

lence, a shared apotheosis arrives in the shape of a stricken nuclear submarine.

Shot through with menace and black humour, *Fishboy* plumbs the depths and scales the heights and generally refreshes the parts other novels cannot reach. Richard writes dense, poetic prose that balances boldly on sprung rhythms and assured alliteration, weaving a word-spell that is as close to the feverish intensity of an acid-trip as you can get without actually ingesting any hallucinogens. Prepare to be dazzled, repelled and amazed.

Like *Fishboy*, David Profumo's **The Weather in Iceland** (Picador, £6.99) takes place after an apocalypse, but in this case it is the personal apocalypse of Dr Richard Slide, a teacher living anonymously in Geneva, but formerly the Duke of London. It is 1998, and a bloodless military coup has left Britain a bloodless military republic. The aristocracy have been humbled and the Royal Family have fled for the States, with only a certain Princess remaining behind (she has shrewdly married one of the architects of the revolution). Meanwhile, the climate has gone mad, and the world is torn by ecological upheavals.

The Weather in Iceland, however, is not just another future-imperfect novel. Its speculative elements are kept very much in the background. To the fore is the story of Slide's life, from his enchanted childhood in Spellbrook, the family seat, to his present glum, alcohol-soaked middle age in the sterile, committee-run Swiss cantons. From then to now is indeed a slide, and as narrator, Slide

spares us none of the details of his downfall, going over his school days, his agonizing adolescence, his sexual exploits, and all the minor and major tragedies that have coloured his view of humanity and inch by inch stripped him of his innocence, saving the darkest and most damning secret of all for the end.

Slide is not asking to be liked – he is over-privileged, over-educated, yet still a lout, the sort of man who refers to a car accelerator as "the loud pedal" and to a cigarette as a "lung-fucker" – but he earns our sympathy anyway, because he has so few illusions about himself. Profumo, likewise, does himself no favours with an over-ornamented and self-consciously literary style which is easy to admire but hard to enjoy. He also drops in great tracts of well-researched material that seem to have no other purpose than to demonstrate how well he has researched his material. But then there are moments when his struggle for a different mode of expression, for the avoidance of cliché, for the precise word used precisely, pays off: for instance, the joyous ambiguity of the once-louche Slide's admission that, after marriage, he found himself "being highly organized"; and the ache of nostalgia that throbs through the passages describing his upbringing ("But surely I did not dream it, this vanished order of rural England, rinsed with birdsong and latticed with sunlight"). A Swiss watch of a book, then: elegantly constructed, carefully crafted, taking into account all the latest advances in technology while still mindful of tradition, but for all that a little – dare one say it? – too functional. **James Lovegrove**

Books Received

August 1994

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Ackroyd, Peter. **The House of Doctor Dee**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-017117-7, 277pp, B-format paperback, cover by Paula Silcox, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1993; one of the reviewers quoted on the back describes it as "a good old-fashioned spine-chiller of a ghost story... which will also be taken as a serious modern novel.") *5th August 1994.*

Allen, Osric. **The Dark Tunnel: A Comedy**. Robert Temple [65 Mildmay Rd., London N1 4PU], ISBN 0-9523093-1-9, 250pp, hardcover, £12.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is a small-press item, and presumably a debut novel [though we are told absolutely

nothing about the author]; Michael Moorcock is quoted on the front cover: "Vivid prose... it has the effect received from the best magic realists.") *8th September 1994.*

Anderson, Poul. **Harvest of Stars**. Tor, ISBN 0-330-33647-9, 531pp, A-format paperback, cover by Vincent DiFate, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 74; this is the US paperback edition with a British price added, distributed in the UK by Pan Books.) *23rd September 1994.*

Andrews, Colin. **The Foundation**. "F. Paul Wilson writing as Colin Andrews." Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4252-6, 565pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £5.99. (Thriller by a well-known sf/horror novelist; first published in the USA, 1993; "Colin Andrews," as Headline are now pleased to announce to the world, is a pseudonym for F. Paul Wilson.) *15th September 1994.*

Anthony, Piers, and Richard Gilliam, eds. **Tales from the Great Turtle**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85628-8, 396pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; it consists of "Native American fantasies," some of them by Native Americans with names like Owl Goingback, Jay Littlehawk and Debra White Plume; among the better-known authors represented are Jack Dann, Esther M. Friesner, Ed Gorman, Brad Linaweaver, Mike

Resnick, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Pamela Sargent and Jane Yolen.) *November 1994.*

Banks, Iain. **Complicity**. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10571-5, 313pp, B-format paperback, cover by Peter Brown, £6.99. (Non-sf novel by a leading sf writer, first published in 1993; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 77.) *September 1994?*

Billings, Patrick. **The Quiet**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-52131-5, 244pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Thiesen, \$4.50. (Horror novel, first edition; in the copyright statement the author's name is given as Earl Murray.) *Late entry: July publication, received in August 1994.*

Bova, Ben, and A. J. Austin. **To Fear the Light**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85449-8, 352pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; sequel to the same authors' *To Save the Sun* [1992].) *November 1994.*

Brenchley, Chaz. **Paradise**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-58950-7, 480pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition.) *1st September 1994.*

Burns, Jim. **Jim Burns**. "Paper Tiger Miniatures." Dragon's World/Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85028-274-9, unpaginated [about 48pp], hardcover, £3.99. (Sf/fantasy art collection, first edition; this is one of a

series of tiny little books featuring full-colour reproductions of paintings by famous artists; the others which have been issued simultaneously, all at the same size and price, are **Rodney Matthews, Bruce Pennington, Boris Vallejo, Tim White and Patrick Woodroffe**; they might make attractive novelty items, useful for small gifts, but they're so minuscule it's hard to imagine them being of much practical use.) *18th August 1994.*

Campbell, Ramsey. **Alone With the Horrors: The Great Short Fiction of Ramsey Campbell, 1961-1991.** Illustrated by J. K. Potter. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-4349-2, 493pp, A-format paperback, cover by Simon Dewey, £5.99. (Horror collection; first published in the USA, 1993.) *15th September 1994.*

Datlow, Ellen, ed. **Little Deaths: 24 Tales of Sex and Horror.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-014-X, x+454pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; it contains all-new stories by Clive Barker, Pat Cadigan, Harry Crews, Nicola Griffith, M. John Harrison, K. W. Jeter, Joel Lane, Barry N. Malzberg, Joyce Carol Oates, Ruth Rendell, Nicholas Royle, Lucius Shepard, Jack Womack and others; a very strong line-up.) *22nd September 1994.*

Ecà De Queiroz, [Jose Maria]. **The Relic.** Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-94-4, 281pp, B-format paperback, cover by J. M. Turner, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; originally published in Portuguese, 1887; it's about a young man who goes to Palestine in search of a holy relic and experiences a timeslip vision of ancient Jerusalem; the author [1845-1900] was "considered Portugal's greatest nineteenth century novelist," according to the blurb.) *31st August 1994.*

Etchison, Dennis. **Shadowman.** Raven, ISBN 1-85487-342-3, 354pp, A-format paperback, cover by Terry Oakes, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1993; the second release of the new British mass-market paperback imprint, Raven, published by Robinson Ltd.) *12th September 1994.*

Gemmell, David A. **Bloodstone.** "The new John Shannow novel." Legend, ISBN 0-09-935471-3, 298pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *15th September 1993.*

Gemmell, David A. **The First Chronicles of Druss the Legend.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-926141-3, 346pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £4.99. (Fantasy collection, first edition; it consists of four long stories about the warrior hero.) *15th September 1994.*

Golding, Michael. **Simple Prayers.** Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-99616-5, 284pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mark Bannerman, £5.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first

published in the USA, 1994; described as a "haunting fable," set in 14th-century Venice, this is a debut novel by a new American writer who comes with words of praise from the likes of MacDonald Harris and Thomas Keneally.) *8th September 1994.*

Goldstein, Lisa. **Travellers in Magic.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85790-X, 284pp, hardcover, \$20.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; proof copy received; 15 short stories, mainly reprinted from *Asimov's* and various original anthologies.) *December 1994.*

Goodkind, Terry. **Wizard's First Rule.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-230-4, 611pp, hardcover, cover by Doug Beekman, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; as sometimes happens with American works, the use of a prosaic-sounding British place-name is apt to raise a smile in UK readers: "No one could go into or come out of the Midlands," says the blurb, "the Midlands was a land of magic" [we don't think the author has Birmingham or Leicester in mind].) *25th August 1994.*

Gottlieb, Sherry. **Love Bite.** Warner, ISBN 0-7515-1090-4, 277pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994; this is a debut novel by an author previously best known as a bookseller [former owner of "A Change of Hobbit" bookstore in California]; it seems to be marketed to the Anne Rice audience.) *18th August 1994.*

Haining, Peter, ed. **The Armchair Horror Collection: Great Tales from TV Anthology Series.** Orion, ISBN 1-85797-411-5, ix+675pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror anthology, first published as *The Television Late Night Horror Omnibus* in 1993; it contains all-reprint stories by Kingsley Amis, Algernon Blackwood, Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, John Dickson Carr, Roald Dahl, Conan Doyle, L. P. Hartley, H. P. Lovecraft, M. R. James, Stephen King, Nigel Kneale, Richard Matheson, Edgar Allan Poe, H. G. Wells, Cornell Woolrich and many more.) *1st September 1994.*

Haining, Peter, ed. **Great Irish Tales of the Unimaginable: Stories of Fantasy and Myth.** Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63206-X, 309pp, hardcover, cover by Charles Bentley, £14.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains all-reprint stories by Lord Dunsany, Lady Gregory, Mary Lavin, Dorothy Macardle, Julia O'Faolain, Standish James O'Grady, James Stephens, Mervyn Wall, Maurice Walsh, T. H. White, W. B. Yeats and many more.) *22nd September 1994.*

Harris, Joanne. **Sleep, Pale Sister.** "A Gothic Tale." Arrow, ISBN 0-09-927051-X, 404pp, A-format paperback, cover by Thomas Cooper Gotch, £4.99. (Horror [?] novel, first edition; the author is British, and this is her second novel following *The Evil Seed* [1992].) *15th September 1994.*

Hill, Douglas. **The Leafless Forest: The Apotheosis Trilogy, Book Two.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32960-X, ix+294pp, C-format paperback, cover by Duncan Storr, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) *9th September 1994.*

Hill, Douglas. **The Lightless Dome: Book 1 in the Apotheosis Trilogy.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-33166-3, ix+304pp, A-format paperback, cover by Duncan Storr, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993.) *9th September 1994.*

Kerr, Katharine. **Darkspell.** Revised edition. Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56888-4, 413pp, A-format paperback, \$5.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987; proof copy received.) *December 1994.*

Kilworth, Garry D. **Archangel.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05762-9, 254pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to his previous horror outing, *Angel*.) *November 1994.*

Lackey, Mercedes. **Storm Warning: Book One of the Mage Storms.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-189-8, 403pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1994; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the first in a new sub-series of "Valdemar" novels.) *25th August 1994.*

La Plante, Richard. **Leopard.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85532-X, 320pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the UK, 1993; sequel to the author's *Mantis*.) *August 1994.*

Lee, Tanith. **Black Unicorn.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-211-9, 188pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) *22nd September 1994.*

Lumley, Brian. **Bloodwars: Vampire World, Volume Three.** Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-016995-4, 776pp, A-format paperback, cover by George Underwood, £5.99. (Horror novel, first edition.) *29th September 1994.*

McCaffrey, Anne. **The Dolphins of Pern.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03737-5, xv+300pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Weston, £14.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; yet another in the lengthy "Pern" series; Dr Jack Cohen is acknowledged for his assistance with biological details.) *8th December 1994.*

McNally, Clare. **There He Keeps Them Very Well.** Tor, ISBN 0-812-53525-1, 362pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul E. Stinson, \$4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; it's Virginia ("V. C.") Andrews-lookalike stuff.) *Late entry: July publication, received in August 1994.*

McNamara, Peter, and Margaret Winch, eds. **Alien Shores: An Anthology of Australian Science Fiction.** Introduction by Damien Broderick. Aphelion, ISBN 1-875346-09-0, 603pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Beswick, AS\$19.95 (£7.50 UK). (Sf anthology, first edition; the third representative

Australian anthology to appear in the past year [the others were *Mortal Fire* ed. Terry Dowling and Van Ikin, and *Metaworlds* ed. Paul Collins], this is also the biggest; it contains a mixture of new and reprint stories by the usual people: Damien Broderick, Terry Dowling, Greg Egan, Leanne Frahm, Rosaleen Love, Sean McMullen, Lucy Sussex, George Turner, Paul Voermans, Wynne Whiteford and many others; copies are available in Britain from the Unlimited Dream Company: see our Small Ads.) *No date shown: received in August 1994.*

Mason, Anita. **The Illusionist.** Penguin, ISBN 0-14-023477-2, 283pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mack Manning, £5.99. (Historical novel which is possibly also a horror/fantasy; first published in 1983; shortlisted for the Booker Prize on its original publication, it's described as being about "Simon Magus: necromancer, sorcerer of Samaria, inspiration of the Faust legend.") *25th August 1994.*

Masterton, Graham. **Fortnight of Fear.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-4438-5, 312pp, hardcover, cover by Derek Colligan, £15.99. (Horror collection, first edition.) *27th October 1994.*

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Towers of the Sunset.** "Return to the magic world of Recluce." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-230-5, 536pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in *Interzone* 62.) *22nd September 1994.*

Newman, Kim. **The Quorum.** Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0132-3, 311pp, hardcover, \$21.

(Horror novel, first published in the UK, 1994; proof copy received; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 83.) *October 1994.*

Pratchett, Terry. **Interesting Times.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05800-5, 283pp, hardcover, cover by Josh Kirby, £14.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is Pratchett's "Chinese" novel, featuring the return of Rincewind the Wizard, Cohen the Barbarian... and a butterfly.) *3rd November 1994.*

Resnack, Mike. **A Miracle of Rare Design: A Tragedy of Transcendence.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85484-6, 255pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *December 1994.*

Slade, Michael. **Ripper.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-450-61002-0, 377pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA [?], 1994; "Michael Slade" is a pseudonym for a pair of Canadian lawyers; the book is described as "full-strength" horror, which presumably means it's really gruesome.) *1st September 1994.*

Somtow, S. P. **Armorica.** "The stunning sequel to *Riverrun*." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-188-0, 256pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA as *Forest of the Night*, 1992.) *18th August 1994.*

Spinrad, Norman. **Pictures at 11.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-37384-6, 455pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it seems to be a near-

future TV novel, about eco-terrorism and the media.) *December 1994.*

Tarr, Judith. **Spear of Heaven.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85543-5, 351pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; states the blurb: "return to Avaryan in this sequel to *Arrows of the Sun*.") *November 1994.*

Willis, Connie. **Uncharted Territory.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61748-3, 218pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Van Houten, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA [?], 1994; it consists of the title piece [a new short novel] plus two reprinted stories, "Fire Watch" and "Even the Queen.") *1st September 1994.*

Wingrove, David. **Beneath the Tree of Heaven: Chung Kuo, Book Five.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-60299-0, xxvi+581pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1993.) *1st September 1994.*

Wingrove, David. **White Moon, Red Dragon: Chung Kuo, Book Six.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-450-56418-5, xx+444pp, hardcover, cover by Tim White, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition.) *1st September 1994.*

Wurts, Janny. **The Curse of the Mistwraith: The Wars of Light and Shadows, Volume 1.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21069-5, xiii+830pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1993; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 75.) *22nd August 1994.*

Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received which fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" has been coined as a heading for the sake of brevity.

Harrington, William. **Columbo: The Helter Skelter Murders.** Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85537-0, 285pp, hardcover, cover by Dan Gonzalez, \$19.95. (Crime television-series spinoff novel, first edition; this one is not sf or fantasy in the least but it has been sent to us for review, and it serves to demonstrate that the phenomenon of "spinoffery" is by no means confined to the sf/fantasy fields; in this volume, the dishevelled detective tangles with Charles Manson's gang; in a previous volume, *Columbo: The Grassy Knoll*, he became involved retrospectively with the Kennedy assassination; author Harrington is also said to be the talent behind the "Eliott Roosevelt" series of White House mysteries.) *August 1994.*

Howe, David J. **Timeframe: The Illustrated History.** "Doctor Who." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-86369-861-1, 122pp, very large-format paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated history of the "Doctor Who" sf television series and its spinoffs; first published in 1993; this edition is slightly revised.) *18th August 1994.*

Messingham, Simon. **Strange England.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20419-0, 276pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campbell, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *18th August 1994.*

Nicholls, Stan. **David Gemmell's Wolf in Shadow: The Graphic Novel.** Illustrated by Fangorn. Legend, ISBN 0-09-927561-9, unpaginated, very large-paperback, cover by Fangorn, £9.99. (Fantasy graphic novel, adapted from the book by David A. Gemmell; first edition.) *15th September 1994.*

Pratchett, Terry. **Mort: A Discworld Big Comic.** Illustrated by Graham Higgins. Gollancz/VG Graphics, ISBN 0-575-05697-5, 94pp, hardcover, cover by Graham Higgins, £12.99. (Fantasy graphic novel, adapted from Pratchett's original book by the author himself; first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) *8th September 1994.*

Price, John-Allen. **Frenzy: The Apostle of Insanity Trilogy, Volume Two.** "Mutant Chronicles." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-451-45360-3, 266pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Shared-world sf novel, based on a role-playing game; first published in the USA, 1994; it's copyright "Target Games, AB"; this is the American first edition with a British price sticker.) *25th August 1994.*

Sargent, Carl, and Marc Gascoigne. **Nosferatu.** "Shadowrun." Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-451-45302-6, 287pp, A-format paperback, cover by Romas Kukalis, £3.99. (Shared-world sf/fantasy novel, based on a role-playing game; first published in the USA, 1994; it's copyright "FASA Corporation"; this is the American first edition with a British price sticker.) *25th August 1994.*

[Tolkien, J. R. R.] **Tolkien's World: Paintings of Middle-Earth.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10307-5, unpaginated [about 140pp], very large-format paperback, cover by Ted Nasmith, £12.99. (Fantasy picture book, first published in 1992; no editor is credited; each full-colour painting is accompanied by a short quotation from Tolkien; artists represented include Inger Edelfeldt, Roger Garland, Michael Hague, John Howe, Alan Lee and Ted Nasmith.) *September 1994.*

PETER HAMMILL. To mark the release of his new album *Roaring Forties*, Serious Speakout present PETER HAMMILL's only London concert this year: Wednesday 26 October 1994 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank. Peter will be playing with a band – names tba. Tickets £12.50/£10. Ring 071 928 8800.

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WRITERS IN TWICKENHAM/RICHMOND AREA. Is there an existing writers' group looking for new members? If not, is there anyone out there interested in starting one? Please write to: David Gullen, 12 Seaton Road, Twickenham, Middlesex TW2 7AT.

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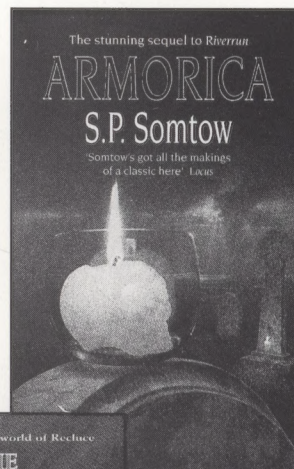
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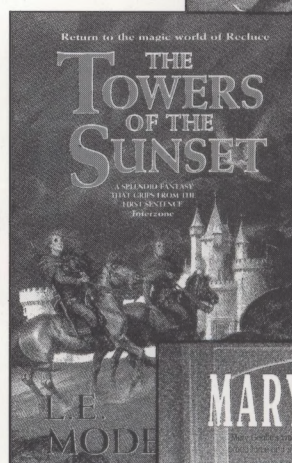


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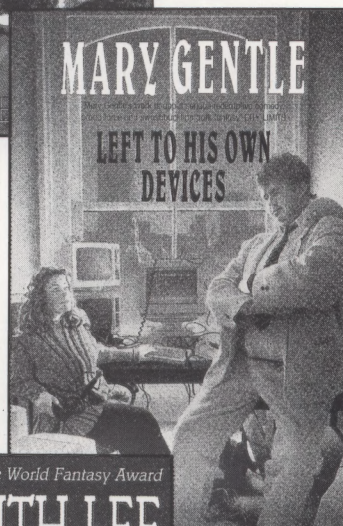
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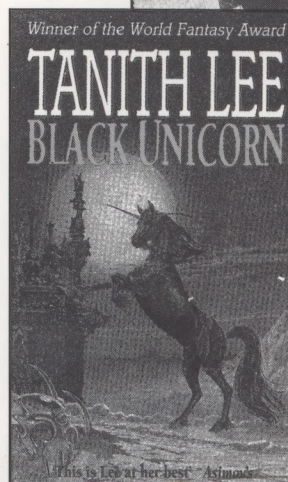
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